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THE ASYMMETRY OF LIFE

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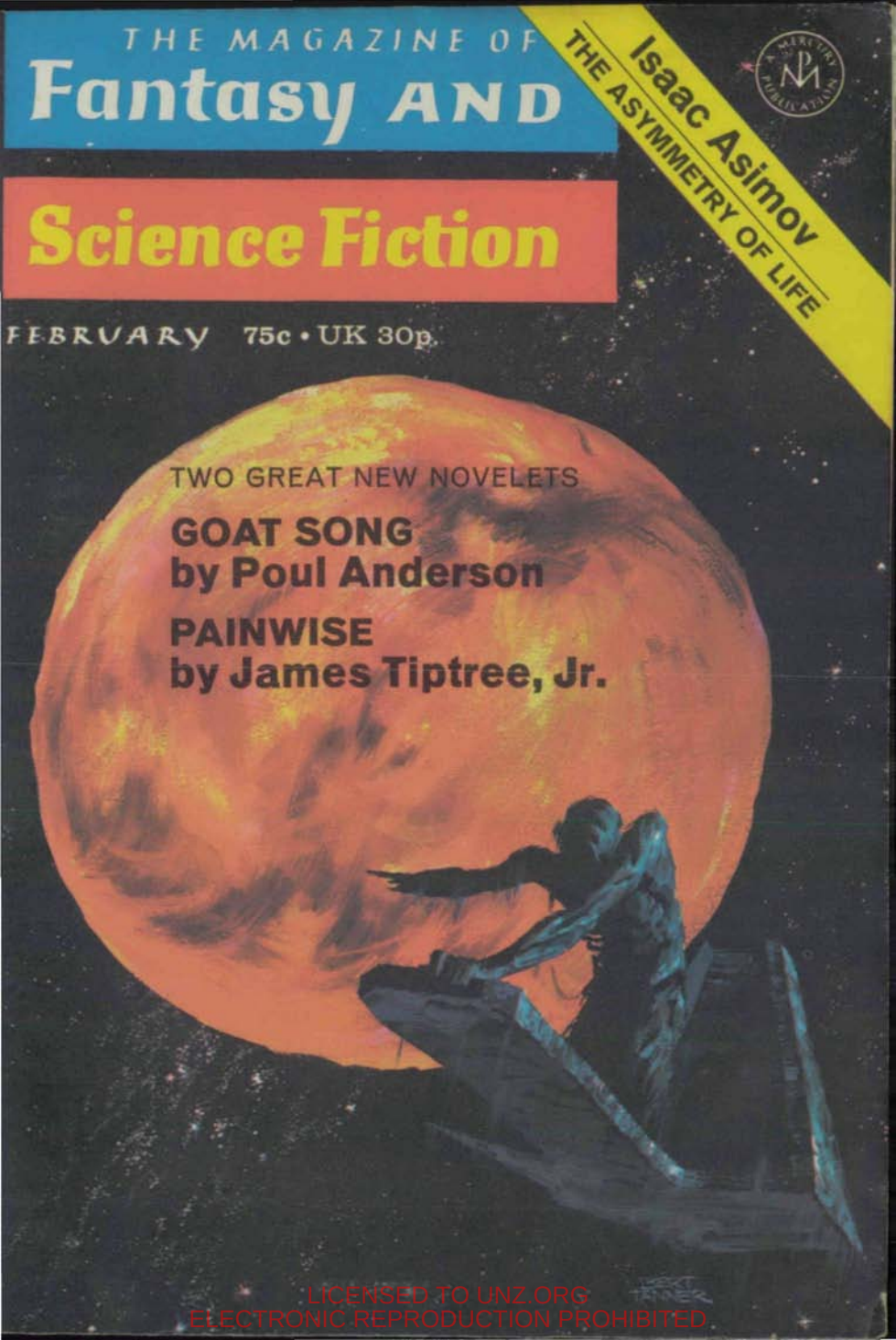

TWO GREAT NEW NOVELETS

GOAT SONG
by Poul Anderson

PAINWISE
by James Tiptree, Jr.

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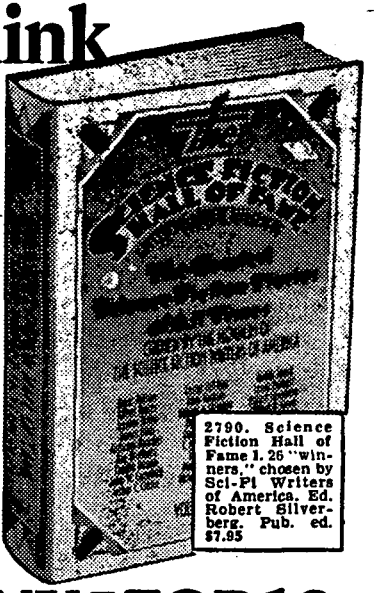

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"In 1966 I happened to be at the Milford writers' conference, where Harlan Ellison showed his story "I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream." In fact, he wrote it there, while a drunken party roared on around him. Much impressed, I saw in certain of his techniques the possibility of quite another tale, and with his consent adapted them to this. My agent promptly sold it to one of the so-called men's magazines, which just as promptly went through a long series of changing ownerships, editors, and policies, and finally died without ever having printed it. Meanwhile — unwittingly, of course — Fred Saberhagen had used the same basic theme; and there was even a historical novel with the same title. I sighed and gave up. But lately I chanced upon the carbon copy, re-read it, and decided it was still different enough to be publishable. Ed Ferman pleased me no end by agreeing. We hope you do too." — Poul Anderson

Goat Song

by POUL ANDERSON

THREE WOMEN: ONE IS dead; one is alive; One is both and neither, and will never live and never die, being immortal in SUM.

On a hill above that valley through which runs the high-road, I await Her passage. Frost came early this year, and the grasses have paled. Otherwise the slope is begrown with blackberry bushes that have been harvested by men and birds, leaving only briars, and with certain apple trees. They are very old, those trees, survivors of an orchard raised by generations which none but SUM now remembers (I can see a few fragments of wall thrusting above the brambles)—scattered crazily over the hillside and as crazily gnarled. A little fruit remains on them. Chill across my skin, a gust shakes loose an apple. I hear it knock on the earth, another stroke of some eternal clock. The shrubs whisper to the wind.

Elsewhere the ridges around me are wooded, afire with scarlets, brasses, bronzes. The sky is huge, the westering sun wan-bright. The valley is filling with a deeper blue, a haze whose slight smokiness touches my nostrils. This is Indian summer, the funeral pyre of the year.

There have been other seasons. There have been other lifetimes, before mine and hers; and in those days they had words to sing with. We still allow ourselves music, though, and I have spent much time planting

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melodies around my rediscovered words. "*In the greenest growth of the Maytime—*" I unsling the harp on my back, and tune it afresh, and sing to her, straight into autumn and the waning day.

"*—You came, and the sun came after,*
And the green grew golden above;
And the flag-flowers lightened with laughter,
And the meadowsweet shook with love."

A footfall stirs the grasses, quite gently, and the woman says, trying to chuckle, "Why, thank you."

Once, so soon after my one's death that I was still dazed by it, I stood in the home that had been ours. This was on the hundred and first floor of a most desirable building. After dark the city flamed for us, blinked, glittered, flung immense sheets of radiance forth like banners. Nothing but SUM could have controlled the firefly dance of a million aircars among the towers: or, for that matter, have maintained the entire city, from nuclear power plants through automated factories, physical and economic distribution networks, sanitation, repair, services, education, culture, order, everything as one immune immortal organism. We had gloried in belonging to this as well as to each other.

But that night I told the kitchen to throw the dinner it had made for me down the waste chute, and ground under my heel the chemical consolations which the medicine cabinet extended to me, and kicked the cleaner as it picked up the mess, and ordered the lights not to go on, anywhere in our suite. I stood by the vieWall, looking out across megalopolis, and it was tawdry. In my hands I had a little clay figure she had fashioned herself. I turned it over and over and over.

But I had forgotten to forbid the door to admit visitors. It recognized this woman and opened for her. She had come with the kindly intention of teasing me out of a mood that seemed to her unnatural. I heard her enter, and looked around through the gloom. She had almost the same height as my girl did, and her hair chanced to be bound in a way that my girl often favored, and the figurine dropped from my grasp and shattered, because for an instant I thought she was my girl. Since then I have been hard put not to hate Thrakia.

This evening, even without so much sundown light, I would not make that mistake. Nothing but the silvery bracelet about her left wrist bespeaks the past we share. She is in wildcountry garb: boots, kilt of true fur and belt of true leather, knife at hip

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and rifle slung on shoulder. Her locks are matted and snarled, her skin brown from weeks of weather; scratches and smudges show beneath the fantastic zigzags she has painted in many colors on herself. She wears a necklace of bird skulls.

Now that one who is dead was, in her own way, more a child of trees and horizons than Thrakia's followers. She was so much at home in the open that she had no need to put off clothes or cleanliness, reason or gentleness, when we sickened of the cities and went forth beyond them. From this trait I got many of the names I bestowed on her, such as Wood's Colt or Fallow Hind or, from my prowlings among ancient books, Dryad and Elven. (She liked me to choose her names, and this pleasure had no end, because she was inexhaustible.)

I let my harpstring ring into silence. Turning about, I say to Thrakia, "I wasn't singing for you. Not for anyone. Leave me alone."

She draws a breath. The wind ruffles her hair and brings me an odor of her: not female sweetness, but fear. She clenches her fists and says, "You're crazy."

"Wherever did you find a meaningful word like that?" I gibe; for my own pain and—to be truthful—my own fear must strike out at something, and here she stands. "Aren't you content any longer with 'untranquil' or 'disequilibrated'?"

"I got it from you," she says defiantly, "you and your damned archaic songs. There's another word, 'damned.' And how it suits you! When are you going to stop this morbidity?"

"And commit myself to a clinic and have my brain laundered nice and sanitary? Not soon, darling." I use *that* last word aforethought, but she cannot know what scorn and sadness are in it for me, who know that once it could also have been a name for my girl. The official grammar and pronunciation of language is as frozen as every other aspect of our civilization, thanks to electronic recording and neuronic teaching; but meanings shift and glide about like subtle serpents. (O adder that stung my Foalfoot!)

I shrug and say in my driest, most city-technological voice, "Actually, I'm the practical, nonmorbid one. Instead of running away from my emotions—via drugs, or neuroadjustment, or playing at savagery like you, for that matter—I'm about to implement a concrete plan for getting back the person who made me happy."

"By disturbing Her on Her way home?"

"Anyone has the right to

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petition the Dark Queen while She's abroad on earth."

"But this is past the proper time—"

"No law's involved, just custom. People are afraid to meet Her outside a crowd, a town, bright flat lights. They won't admit it, but they are. So I came here precisely not to be part of a queue. I don't want to speak into a recorder for subsequent computer analysis of my words. How could I be sure She was listening? I want to meet Her as myself, a unique being, and look in Her eyes while I make my prayer."

Thrakia chokes a little. "She'll be angry."

"Is She able to be angry, any more?"

"I. . .I don't know. What you mean to ask for is so impossible, though. So absurd. That SUM should give you back your girl. You know It never makes exceptions."

"Isn't She Herself an exception?"

"That's different. You're being silly. SUM has to have a, well, a direct human liaison. Emotional and cultural feedback, as well as statistics. How else can It govern rationally? And She must have been chosen out of the whole world. Your girl, what was she? Nobody!"

"To me, she was everybody."

"You—" Thrakia catches her lip in her teeth. One hand reaches out and closes on my bare forearm, a hard hot touch, the grimy fingernails biting. When I make no response, she lets go and stares at the ground. A V of outbound geese passes overhead. Their cries come shrill through the wind, which is loudening in the forest.

"Well," she says, "you are special. You always were. You went to space and came back, with the Great Captain. You're maybe the only man alive who understands about the ancients. And your singing, yes, you don't really entertain; your songs trouble people and can't be forgotten. So maybe She will listen to you. But SUM won't. It can't give special resurrections. Once that was done, a single time, wouldn't it have to be done for everybody? The dead would overrun the living."

"Not necessarily," I say. "In any event, I mean to try."

"Why can't you wait for the promised time? Surely, then, SUM will recreate you two in the same generation."

"I'd have to live out this life, at least, without her," I say, looking away also, down to the highroad which shines through shadow like death's snake, the length of the valley. "Besides, how do you know there ever will be any resurrections? We have only a promise. No, less than that policy."

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She gasps, steps back, raises her hands as if to fend me off. Her soul bracelet casts light into my eyes. I recognize an embryo exorcism. She lacks rital; every "superstition" was patiently scrubbed out of our metal-and-energy world, long ago. But if she has no word for it, no concept, nevertheless she recoils from blasphemy.

So I say, wearily, not wanting an argument, wanting only to wait here alone: "Never mind. There could be some natural catastrophe, like a giant asteroid striking, that wiped out the system before conditions had become right for resurrections to commence."

"That's impossible," she says, almost frantic. "The homeostats, the repair functions—"

"All right, call it a vanishingly unlikely theoretical contingency. Let's declare that I'm so selfish I want Swallow Wing back now, in this life of mine, and don't give a curse whether that'll be fair to the rest of you."

You won't care either, anyway, I think. None of you. You don't grieve. It is your own precious private consciousness that you wish to preserve; no one else is close enough to you to matter very much. Would you believe me if I told you I am quite prepared to offer SUM my own death in exchange for It releasing Blossom-in-the-Sun?

I don't speak that thought, which would be cruel, nor repeat what is crueler: my fear that SUM lies, that the dead never will be disgorged. For (I am not the All-Controller; I think not with vacuum and negative energy levels but with ordinary earth-begotten molecules; yet I can reason somewhat dispassionately, being disillusioned) consider—

The object of the game is to maintain a society stable, just, and sane. This requires satisfaction not only of somatic, but of symbolic and instinctual needs. Thus children must be allowed to come into being. The minimum number per generation is equal to the maximum: that number which will maintain a constant population.

It is also desirable to remove the fear of death from men. Hence the promise: At such time as it is socially feasible, SUM will begin to refashion us, with our complete memories but in the pride of our youth. This can be done over and over, life after life across the millennia. So death is, indeed, a sleep.

—*in that sleep of death, what dreams may come*—No. I myself dare not dwell on this. I ask merely, privately: Just when and how does SUM expect conditions (in a stabilized society, mind you) to have

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become so different from today's that the reborn can, in their millions, safely be welcomed back?

I see no reason why SUM should not lie to us. We, too, are objects in the world that It manipulates.

"We've quarreled about this before, Thrakia," I sigh. "Often. "Why do you bother?"

"I wish I knew," she answers low. Half to herself, she goes on: "Of course I want to copulate with you. You must be good, the way that girl used to follow you about with her eyes, and smile when she touched your hand, and—But you can't be better than everyone else. That's unreasonable. There are only so many possible ways. So why do I care if you wrap yourself up in silence and go off alone? Is it that that makes you a challenge?"

"You think too much," I say. "Even here. You're a pretend primitive. You visit wildcountry to 'slake inborn atavistic impulses'. . .but you can't dismantle that computer inside yourself and simply feel, simply be."

She bristles. I touched a nerve there. Looking past her, along the ridge of fiery maple and sumac, brassy elm and great dun oak, I see others emerge from beneath the trees. Women exclusively, her followers, as unkempt as she; one has a brace of ducks lashed to her waist, and their blood has trickled down her thigh and dried black. For this movement, this unadmitted mystique has become Thrakia's by now: that not only men should forsake the easy routine and the easy pleasure of the cities, and become again, for a few weeks each year, the carnivores who begot our species; women too should seek out starkness, the better to appreciate civilization when they return.

I feel a moment's unease. We are in no park, with laid out trails and campground services. We are in wildcountry. Not many men come here, ever, and still fewer women; for the region is, literally, beyond the law. No deed done here is punishable. We are told that this helps consolidate society, as the most violent among us may thus vent their passions. But I have spent much time in wildcountry since my Morning Star went out—myself in quest of nothing but solitude—and I have watched what happens through eyes that have also read anthropology and history. Institutions are developing; ceremonies, tribalisms, acts of blood and cruelty and acts elsewhere called unnatural are becoming more elaborate and more expected every year. Then the practitioners go home to

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their cities and honestly believe they have been enjoying fresh air, exercise, and good tension-releasing fun.

Let her get angry enough and Thrakia can call knives to her aid.

Wherefore I make myself lay both hands on her shoulders, and meet the tormented gaze, and say most gently, "I'm sorry. I know you mean well. You're afraid She will be annoyed and bring misfortune on your people."

Thrakia gulps. "No," she whispers. "That wouldn't be logical. But I'm afraid of what might happen to you. And then—" Suddenly she throws herself against me. I feel arms, breasts, belly press through my tunic, and smell meadows in her hair and musk in her mouth. "You'd be gone!" she wails. "Then who'd sing to us?"

"Why, the planet's crawling with entertainers," I stammer.

"You're more than that," she says. "So much more. I don't like what you sing, not really—and what you've sung since that stupid girl died, oh, meaningless, horrible!—but, I don't know why, I *want* you to trouble me."

Awkward, I pat her back. The sun now stands very little above the treetops. Its rays slant interminably through the booming, frosting air. I shiver and wonder what to do.

A sound rescues me. It comes from one end of the valley below us, where further view is blocked off by two cliffs; it thunders deep in our ears and rolls through the earth into our bones. We have heard that sound in the cities, and been glad to have walls and lights and multitudes around us. Now we are alone with it, the noise of Her chariot.

The women shriek, I hear them faintly across wind and rumble and my own pulse, and they vanish into the woods. They will seek their camp, dress warmly, build enormous fires; presently they will eat their ecstatics, and rumors are uneasy about what they do after that.

Thrakia seizes my left wrist, above the soul bracelet, and hauls. "Harper, come with me!" she pleads. I break loose from her and stride down the hill toward the road. A scream follows me for a moment.

Light still dwells in the sky and on the ridges, but as I descend into that narrow valley, I enter dusk, and it thickens. Indistinct bramble bushes whicker where I brush them, and claw back at me. I feel the occasional scratch on my legs, the tug as my garment is snagged, the chill that I breathe, but dimly. My perceived-outer-reality is overpowered by the rushing of Her chariot and my blood. My inner-universe is fear, yes, but

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exaltation too, a drunkenness which sharpens instead of dulling the senses, a psychedelia which opens the reasoning mind as well as the emotions; I have gone beyond myself, I am embodied purpose. Not out of need for comfort, but to voice what Is, I return to words whose speaker rests centuries dust, and lend them my own music. I sing:

"—Gold is my heart, and the world's golden.
And one peak tipped with light;
And the air lies still above the hill
With the first fear of night;

Till mystery down the soundless valley
Thunders, and dark is here;
And the wind blows, and the light goes,
And the night is full of fear.

And I know one night, on some far height,
In the tongue I never knew,
I yet shall hear the tidings clear

They'll call the news from hill to hill,
Dark and uncomforted,
Earth and sky and the winds; and I
Shall know that you are dead.—"

But I have reached the valley floor, and She has come in sight.

Her chariot is unlit, for radar eyes and inertial guides need no lamps, nor sun nor stars. Wheelless, the steel tear rides on its own roar and thrust of air. The pace is not great, far less than any of our mortals' vehicles are wont to take. Men say the Dark Queen rides thus slowly in order that She may perceive with Her own senses and so be the better prepared to counsel SUM. But now Her annual round is finished; She is homeward bound; until spring She will dwell with It Which is our lord. Why does She not hasten tonight?

Because Death has never a need of haste? I wonder. And as I step into the middle of the road, certain lines from the yet more ancient past rise tremendous within me, and I strike my harp and chant them louder than the approaching car:

"I that in heill was and gladness
Am trublit now with great sickness
And feblit with infirmitie:—

Timor mortis conturbat me."

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The car detects me and howls a warning. I hold my ground. The car could swing around; the road is wide, and in any event a smooth surface is not absolutely necessary. But I hope, I believe that She will be aware of an obstacle in Her path, and tune in Her various amplifiers, and find me abnormal enough to stop for. Who, in SUM's world—who, even among the explorers that It has sent beyond in Its unappeasable hunger for data—would stand in a cold wildcountry dusk and shout while his harp snarls:

"Our presence here is all vain glory,
This fals world is but transitory,
The flesh is bruckle, the Feynd is slee:—

The state of man does change and vary,
Now sound, now sick, now blyth, now sary,
Now dansand mirry, now like to die:—

No state in Erd here standis sicker;
As with the wynd wavis the wicker
So wannis this world's vanitie:—

Timor mortis conturbat me. —?"

The car draws alongside and sinks to the ground. I let my strings die away into the wind. The sky overhead and in the west is gray-purple; eastward it is quite dark and a few early stars peer forth. Here, down in the valley, shadows are heavy and I cannot see very well.

The canopy slides back. She stands erect in the chariot, thus looming over me. Her robe and cloak are black, fluttering like restless wings; beneath the cowl Her face is a white blur. I have seen it before, under full light, and in how many thousands of pictures; but at this hour I cannot call it back to my mind, not entirely. I list sharp-sculptured profile and pale lips, sable hair and long green eyes, but these are nothing more than words.

"What are you doing?" She has a lovely low voice; but is it, as, oh, how rarely since SUM took Her to Itself, is it the least shaken? "What is that you were singing?"

My answer comes so strong that my skull resonates, for I am borne higher and higher on my tide. "Lady of Ours, I have a petition."

"Why did you not bring it before Me when I walked among men? Tonight I am homebound. You must wait till I ride forth with the new year."

"Lady of Ours, neither You nor I would wish living ears to hear what I have to say."

She regards me for a long while. Do I indeed sense fear

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also in Her? (Surely not of me. Her chariot is armed and armored, and would react with machine speed to protect Her should I offer violence. And should I somehow, incredibly, kill Her, or wound Her beyond chemosurgical repair, She of all beings has no need to doubt death. The ordinary bracelet cries with quite sufficient radio loudness to be heard by more than one thanatic station, when we die; and in that shielding the soul can scarcely be damaged before the Winged Heels arrive to bear it off to SUM. Surely the Dark Queen's circlet can call still further, and is still better insulated, than any mortal's. And She will most absolutely be recreated. She has been, again and again; death and rebirth every seven years keep Her eternally young in the service of SUM. I have never been able to find out when She was first born.)

Fear, perhaps, of what I have sung and what I might speak?

At last She says—I can scarcely hear through the gusts and creakings in the trees—"Give me the Ring, then."

The dwarf robot which stands by Her throne when She sits among men appears beside Her and extends the massive dull-silver circle to me. I place my left arm within, so that my soul is enclosed. The tablet on the upper surface of the Ring, which looks so much like a jewel, slants away from me; I cannot read what flashes onto the bezel. But the faint glow picks Her features out of murk as She bends to look.

Of course, I tell myself, the actual soul is not scanned. That would take too long. Probably the bracelet which contains the soul has an identification code built in. The Ring sends this to an appropriate part of SUM, Which instantly sends back what is recorded under that code. I hope there is nothing more to it. SUM has not seen fit to tell us.

"What do you call yourself at the moment?" She asks.

A current of bitterness crosses my tide. "Lady of Ours, why should You care? Is not my real name the number I got when I was allowed to be born?"

Calm descends once more upon Her. "If I am to evaluate properly what you say, I must know more about you than these few official data. Name indicates mood."

I too feel unshaken again, my tide running so strong and smooth that I might not know I was moving did I not see time recede behind me. "Lady of Ours, I cannot give You a fair answer. In this past year I have not troubled with names, or with much of anything else. But some people who knew me

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from earlier days call me Harper."

"What do you do besides make that sinister music?"

"These days, nothing, Lady of Ours. I've money to live out my life, if I eat sparingly and keep no home. Often I am fed and housed for the sake of my songs."

"What you sang is unlike anything I have heard since—" Anew, briefly, that robot serenity is shaken. "Since before the world was stabilized. You should not wake dead symbols, Harper. They walk through men's dreams."

"Is that bad?"

"Yes. The dreams become nightmares. Remember: mankind, every man who ever lived, was insane before SUM brought order, reason, and peace."

"Well, then," I say, "I will cease and desist if I may have my own dead wakened for me."

She stiffens. The tablet goes out. I withdraw my arm and the Ring is stored away by Her servant. So again She is faceless, beneath flickering stars, here at the bottom of this shadowed valley. Her voice falls cold as the air: "No one can be brought back to life before Resurrection Time is ripe."

I do not say, "What about You?" for that would be vicious. What did She think, how did She weep, when SUM chose Her of all the young on earth? What does She endure in Her centuries? I dare not imagine.

Instead, I smite my harp and sing, quietly this time:

"Strew on her roses, roses,
And never a spray of yew.
In quiet she reposes:
Ah! would that I did too."

"Her cabin'd, ample Spirit
It flutter'd and fail'd for breath.
To-night it doth inherit
The vasty hall of Death."

I know why my songs strike so hard: because they bear dreads and passions that no one is used to—that most of us hardly know could exist—in SUM's ordered universe. But I had not the courage to hope She would be as torn by them as I see. Has She not lived with more darkness and terror than the ancients could conceive? She calls, "Who has died?"

"She had many names, Lady of Ours," I say. "None was beautiful enough. I can tell You her number, though."

"Your daughter? I. . .sometimes I am asked if a dead child cannot be brought back. Not often, any more, when they go so soon to the crèche. But sometimes. I tell the mother she may have a new one; but if ever We started recreating dead infants, at what age level could We stop?"

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"No, this was my woman."

"Impossible!" Her tone seeks to be not unkindly but is, instead, well-nigh frantic. "You will have no trouble finding others. You are handsome, and your psyche is, is, is extraordinary. It burns like Lucifer."

"Do You remember the name Lucifer, Lady of Ours?" I pounce. "Then You are old indeed. So old that You must also remember how a man might desire only one woman, but her above the whole world and heaven."

She tries to defend Herself with a jeer: "Was that mutual, Harper? I know more of mankind than you do, and surely I am the last chaste woman in existence."

"Now that she is gone, Lady, yes, perhaps You are. But we—Do You know how she died? We had gone to a wild country area. A man saw her, alone, while I was off hunting gem rocks to make her a necklace. He approached her. She refused him. He threatened force. She fled. This was desert land, viper land, and she was barefoot. One of them bit her. I did not find her till hours later. By then the poison and the unshaded sun—She died quite soon after she told me what had happened and that she loved me. I could not get her body to chemosurgery in time for normal revival procedures. I had to let them cremate her and take her soul away to SUM."

"What right have you to demand her back, when no one else can be given their own?"

"The right that I love her, and she loves me. We are more necessary to each other than sun or moon. I do not think You could find another two people of whom this is so, Lady. And is not everyone entitled to claim what is necessary to his life? How else can society be kept whole?"

"You are being fantastic," She says thinly. "Let me go."

"No, Lady. I am speaking sober truth. But poor plain words won't serve me. I sing to You because then maybe You will understand." And I strike my harp anew, but it is more to her than Her that I sing.

"If I had thought thou couldst have died,
I might not weep for thee;
But I forgot, when by thy side,
That thou couldst mortal be:
It never through my mind had past
The time would e'er be o'er,
And on thee should look my last,
And thou shouldst smile no more!"

"I cannot—" She falters. "I did not know such feelings existed any longer."

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"Now You do, Lady of Ours. And is that not an important datum for SUM?"

"Yes. If true." Abruptly She leans toward me. I see Her shudder in the murk, under the flapping cloak, and hear Her jaws clatter with cold. "I cannot linger here. But ride with Me. Sing to Me. I think I can bear it."

So much have I scarcely expected. But my destiny is upon me. I mount into the chariot. The canopy slides shut and we proceed.

The main cabin encloses us. Behind its rear door must be facilities for Her living on earth; this is a big vehicle. But here is little except curved panels. They are true wood of different comely grains: so She also needs periodic escape from our machine existence, does She? Furnishing is scant and austere. The only sound is our passage, muffled to a murmur for us; and, because their photomultipliers are not activated, the scanners show nothing outside but night. We huddle close to a glower, hands extended toward its fieriness. Our shoulders brush, our bare arms, Her skin is soft and Her hair falls loose over the thrown-back cowl, smelling of the summer which is dead. What, is She still human?

After a timeless time, She says, not yet looking at me: "The thing you sang, there on the highroad as I came near—I do not remember it. Not even from the years before I became what I am."

"It is older than SUM," I answer, "and its truth will outlive It."

"Truth?" I see Her tense Herself. "Sing Me the rest."

My fingers are no longer too numb to call forth chords.

"—Unto the Death gois all Estatis,
Princis, Prelattis, and Potestatis,
Baith rich and poor of all degree:—

He takis the knichtis in to the field
Enarmit under helm and scheild;
Victor he is at all mellie:—

That strong unmerciful tyrand
Takis, on the motheris breast sowkand,
The babe full of benignitie:—

He takis the campion in the stour,
The captain closit in the tour,
The ladie in bout full of bewtie:—"

He sparis no lord for his piscence,
Na clerk for his intelligence;

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His awful straik may no man flee:—
Timor mortis conturbat me."

She breaks me off, clapping hands to ears and half shrieking, "No!"

I, grown unmerciful, pursue Her: "You understand now, do You not? You are not eternal either. SUM isn't. Not Earth, not Sun, not stars. We hid from the truth. Every one of us. I too, until I lost the one thing which made everything make sense. Then I had nothing left to lose, and could look with clear eyes. And what I saw was Death."

"Get out! Let Me alone!"

"I will not let the whole world alone, Queen, until I get her back. Give me her again, and I'll believe in SUM again. I'll praise It till men dance for joy to hear Its name."

She challenges me with wildcat eyes. "Do you think such matters to It?"

"Well," I shrug, "songs could be useful. They could help achieve the great objective sooner. Whatever that is. 'Optimization of total human activity'—wasn't that the program? I don't know if it still is. SUM has been adding to Itself so long. I doubt if You Yourself understand Its purposes, Lady of Ours."

"Don't speak as if It were alive," She says harshly. "It is a computer-effector complex. Nothing more."

"Are You certain?"

"I—Yes. It thinks, more widely and deeply than any human ever did or could; but It is not alive, not aware, It has no consciousness. That is one reason why It decided It needed Me."

"Be that as it may, Lady," I tell Her, "the ultimate result, whatever It finally does with us, lies far in the future. At present I care about that; I worry; I resent our loss of self-determination. But that's because only such abstractions are left to me. Give me back my Lightfoot, and she, not the distant future, will be my concern. I'll be grateful, honestly grateful, and You Two will know it from the songs I then choose to sing. Which, as I said, might be helpful to It."

"You are unbelievably insolent," She says without force.

"No, Lady, just desperate," I say.

The ghost of a smile touches Her lips. She leans back, and murmurs, "Well, I'll take you there. What happens then, you realize, lies outside My power. My observations, My recommendations, are nothing but a few items to take into account, among billions. However. . .we have a long way to travel this night. Give Me what data you think will help you, Harper."

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I do not finish the Lament. Nor do I dwell in any other fashion on grief. Instead, as the hours pass, I call upon those who dealt with the joy (not the fun, not the short delirium, but the joy) that man and woman might once have of each other.

Knowing where we are bound, I too need such comfort.

And the night deepens, and the leagues fall behind us, and finally we are beyond habitation, beyond wildcountry, in the land where life never comes. By crooked moon and waning starlight I see the plain of concrete and iron, the missiles and energy projectors crouched like beasts, the robot aircraft wheeling aloft: and the lines, the relay towers, the scuttling beetle-shaped carriers, that whole transcendent nerve-blood-sinew by which SUM knows and orders the world. For all the flitting about, for all the forces which seethe, here is altogether still. The wind itself seems to have frozen to death. Hoarfrost is gray on the steel shapes. Ahead of us, tiered and mountainous, begins to appear the castle of SUM.

She Who rides with me does not give sign of noticing that my songs have died in my throat. What humanness She showed is departing; Her face is cold and shut; Her voice bears a ring of metal; She looks straight ahead. But She does speak to me for a little while yet:

"Do you understand what is going to happen? For the next half year I will be linked with SUM, integral, another component of It. I suppose you will see Me, but that will merely be My flesh. What speaks to you will be SUM."

"I know." The words must be forced forth. My coming this far is more triumph than any man in creation before me has won; and I am here to do battle for my Dancer-on-Moonglades; but nonetheless my heart shakes me, and is loud in my skull, and my sweat stinks.

I manage, though, to add: "You *will* be a part of It, Lady of Ours. That gives me hope."

For an instant She turns to me, and lays Her hand across mine, and something makes Her again so young and untaken that I almost forget the girl who died; and She whispers, "If you knew how I hope!"

The instant is gone, and I am alone among machines.

We must stop before the castle gate. The wall looms sheer above, so high and high that it seems to be toppling upon me against the westward march of the stars, so black and black that it does not only drink down every light, it radiates blindness. Challenge and response quiver on electronic bands I cannot sense.

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The outer-guardian parts of It have perceived a mortal aboard this craft. A missile launcher swings about to aim its three serpents at me. But the Dark Queen answers—She does not trouble to be peremptory—and the castle opens its jaws for us.

We descend. Once, I think, we cross a river. I hear a rushing and hollow echoing and see droplets glitter where they are cast onto the viewports and outlined against dark. They vanish at once: liquid hydrogen, perhaps, to keep certain parts near absolute zero?

Much later we stop and the canopy slides back. I rise with Her. We are in a room, or cavern, of which I can see nothing, for there is no light except a dull bluish phosphorescence which streams from every solid object, also from Her flesh and mine. But I judge the chamber is enormous, for a sound of great machines at work comes very remotely, as if heard through dream, while our own voices are swallowed up by distance. Air is pumped through, neither warm nor cold, totally without odor, a dead wind.

We descend to the floor. She stands before me, hands crossed on breast, eyes half shut beneath the cowl and not looking at me nor away from me. "Do what you are told, Harper," She says in a voice that has never an overtone, "precisely as you are told." She turns and departs at an even pace. I watch Her go until I can no longer tell Her luminosity from the formless swirlings within my own eyeballs.

A claw plucks my tunic. I look down and am surprised to see that the dwarf robot has been waiting for me this whole time. How long a time that was, I cannot tell.

Its squat form leads me in another direction. Weariness crawls upward through me, my feet stumble, my lips tingle, lids are weighted and muscles have each their separate aches. Now and then I feel a jag of fear, but dully. When the robot indicates *Lie down here*, I am grateful.

The box fits me well. I let various wires be attached to me, various needles be injected which lead into tubes. I pay little attention to the machines which cluster and murmur around me. The robot goes away. I sink into blessed darkness.

I wake renewed in body. A kind of shell seems to have grown between my forebrain and the old animal parts. Far away I can feel the horror and hear the screaming and thrashing of my instincts; but awareness is chill, calm, logical. I have also a feeling that I slept for weeks, months, while leaves blew loose and snow fell on the

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upper world. But this may be wrong, and in no case does it matter. I am about to be judged by SUM.

The little faceless robot leads me off, through murmurous black corridors where the dead wind blows. I unsling my harp and clutch it to me, my sole friend and weapon. So the tranquillity of the reasoning mind which has been decreed for me cannot be absolute. I decide that It simply does not want to be bothered by anguish. (No; wrong; nothing so humanlike; It has no desires; beneath that power to reason is nullity.)

At length a wall opens for us and we enter a room where She sits enthroned. The self-radiation of metal and flesh is not apparent here, for light is provided, a featureless white radiance with no apparent source. White, too, is the muted sound of the machines which encompass Her throne: White are Her robe and face. I look away from the multitudinous unwinking scanner eyes, into Hers, but She does not appear to recognize me. Does She even see me? SUM has reached out with invisible fingers of electromagnetic induction and taken Her back into Itself. I do not tremble or sweat—I cannot—but I square my shoulders, strike one plangent chord, and wait for It to speak.

It does, from some invisible place. I recognize the voice It has chosen to use: my own. The overtones, the inflections are true, normal, what I myself would use in talking as one reasonable man to another. Why not? In computing what to do about me, and in programming Itself accordingly, SUM must have used so many billion bits of information that adequate accent is a negligible subproblem.

No. . .there I am mistaken again. . .SUM does not do things on the basis that It might as well do them as not. This talk with myself is intended to have some effect on me. I do not know what.

"Well," It says pleasantly, "you made quite a journey, didn't you? I'm glad. Welcome."

My instincts bare teeth to hear those words of humanity used by the unfeeling unalive. My logical mind considers replying with an ironic "Thank you," decides against it, and holds me silent.

"You see," SUM continues after a moment that whirrs, "you are unique. Pardon Me if I speak a little bluntly. Your sexual monomania is just one aspect of a generally atavistic, superstition-oriented personality. And yet, unlike the ordinary misfit, you're both strong and realistic enough to

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cope with the world. This chance to meet you, to analyze you while you rested, has opened new insights for Me on human psychophysiology. Which may lead to improved techniques for governing it and its evolution."

"That being so," I reply, "give me my reward."

"Now look here," SUM says in a mild tone, "you if anyone should know I'm not omnipotent. I was built originally to help govern a civilization grown too complex. Gradually, as My program of self-expansion progressed, I took over more and more decision-making functions. They were *given* to Me. People were happy to be relieved of responsibility, and they could see for themselves how much better I was running things than any mortal could. But to this day, My authority depends on a substantial consensus. If I started playing favorites, as by recreating your girl, well, I'd have troubles."

"The consensus depends more on awe than on reason," I say. "You haven't abolished the gods, You've simply absorbed them into Yourself. If You choose to pass a miracle for me, Your prophet singer—and I will be Your prophet if You do this—why, that strengthens the faith of the rest."

"So you think. But your opinions aren't based on any exact data. The historical and anthropological records from the past before Me are unquantitative. I've already phased them out of the curriculum. Eventually, when the culture's ready for such a move, I'll order them destroyed. They're too misleading. Look what they've done to you."

I grin into the scanner eyes. "Instead," I say, "people will be encouraged to think that before the world was, was SUM. All right. I don't care, as long as I get my girl back. Pass me a miracle, SUM, and I'll guarantee You a good payment."

"But I have no miracles. Not in your sense. You know how the soul works. The metal bracelet encloses a pseudo-virus, a set of giant protein molecules with taps directly to the bloodstream and nervous system. They record the chromosome pattern, the synapse flash, the permanent changes, everything. At the owner's death, the bracelet is dissected out. The Winged Heels bring it here, and the information contained is transferred to one of My memory banks. I can use such a record to guide the growing of a new body in the vats; a young body, on which the former habits and recollections are imprinted. But you don't understand the complexity of the process, Harper. It takes Me

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weeks, every seven years, and every available biochemical facility, to recreate My human liaison. And the process isn't perfect, either. The pattern is affected by storage. You might say that this body and brain you see before you remembers each death. And those are short deaths. A longer one—man, use your sense. Imagine."

I can; and the shield between reason and feeling begins to crack. I had sung, of my darling dead:

"No motion has she now,
no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Roll'd round in earth's
diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones,
and trees."

Peace, at least. But if the memory-storage is not permanent but circulating; if, within those gloomy caverns of tubes and wire and outer-space cold, some remnant of her psyche must flit and flicker, alone, unremembering, aware of nothing but having lost life—No!

I smite the harp and shout so the room rings: "Give her back! Or I'll kill you!"

SUM finds it expedient to chuckle; and, horribly, the smile is reflected for a moment on the Dark Queen's lips, though otherwise She never stirs. "And how do you propose to do that?" It asks me.

It knows, I know, what I have in mind, so I counter: "How do You propose to stop me?"

"No need. You'll be considered a nuisance. Someone will decide you ought to have psychiatric treatment. They'll query My diagnostic outlet. I'll recommend certain excisions."

"On the other hand, since You've sifted my mind by now, and since You know how I've affected people with my songs—even the Lady yonder, even Her—wouldn't you rather have me working for You? With words like, *'O taste, and see, how gracious the Lord is; blessed is the man that trusteth in him. O fear the Lord, ye that are his saints: for they that fear him lack nothing.'* I can make You into God."

"In a sense, I already am God."

"And in another sense not. Not yet." I can endure no more. "Why are we arguing? You made Your decision before I woke. Tell me and let me go!"

With an odd carefulness, SUM responds: "I'm still studying you. No harm in admitting to you, My knowledge of the human psyche is as yet imperfect. Certain areas won't yield to computation. I don't know precisely what you'd do, Harper. If to that uncertainty I added a potentially dangerous precedent—"

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"Kill me, then." Let my ghost wander forever with hers, down in Your cryogenic dreams.

"No, that's also inexpedient. You've made yourself too conspicuous and controversial. Too many people know by now that you went off with the Lady." Is it possible that, behind steel and energy, a nonexistent hand brushes across a shadow face in puzzlement? My heartbeat is thick in the silence.

Suddenly It shakes me with decision: "The calculated probabilities do favor your keeping your promises and making yourself useful. Therefore I shall grant your request. However—"

I am on my knees. My forehead knocks on the floor until blood runs into my eyes. I hear through stormwinds:

"—testing must continue. Your faith is Me is not absolute; in fact, you're very skeptical of what you call My goodness. Without additional proof of your willingness to trust Me, I can't let you have the kind of importance which your getting your dead back from Me would give you. Do you understand?"

The question does not sound rhetorical. "Yes," I sob.

"Well, then," says my civilized, almost amiable voice, "I computed that you'd react much as you have done, and prepared for the likelihood. Your woman's body was recreated while you lay under study. The data which make personality are now being fed back into her neurones. She'll be ready to leave this place by the time you do.

"I repeat, though, there has to be a testing. The procedure is also necessary for its effect on you. If you're to be My prophet, you'll have to work pretty closely with Me; you'll have to undergo a great deal of reconditioning; this night we begin the process. Are you willing?"

"Yes, yes, yes, what must I do?"

"Only this: follow the robot out. At some point, she, your woman, will join you. She'll be conditioned to walk so quietly you can't hear her. Don't look back. Not once, until you're in the upper world. A single glance behind you will be an act of rebellion against Me, and a datum indicating you can't really be trusted. . .and that ends everything. Do you understand?"

"Is that all?" I cry. "Nothing more?"

"It will prove more difficult than you think," SUM tells me. My voice fades, as if into illimitable distances: "Farewell, worshiper."

The robot raises me to my feet. I stretch out my arms to

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the Dark Queen. Half blinded with tears, I nonetheless see that She does not see me. "Good-by," I mumble, and let the robot lead me away.

Our walking is long through those murk miles. At first I am in too much of a turmoil, and later too stunned, to know where or how we are bound. But later still, slowly, I become aware of my flesh and clothes and the robot's alloy, glimmering blue in blackness. Sounds and smells are muffled; rarely does another machine pass by, unheeding of us. (What work does SUM have for them?) I am so careful not to look behind me that my neck grows stiff.

Though it is not prohibited, is it, to lift my harp past my shoulder, in the course of strumming a few melodies to keep up my courage, and see if a following illumination is reflected in this polished wood?

Nothing. Well, her second birth must take time—O SUM, be careful of her!—and then she must be led through many tunnels, no doubt, before she makes rendezvous with my back. Be patient, Harper.

Sing. Welcome her home. No, these hollow spaces swallow all music; and she is as yet in that trance of death from which only the Sun and my kiss can wake her; if indeed, she has joined me yet. I listen for other footfalls than my own.

Surely we haven't much further to go. I ask the robot, but of course I get no reply. Make an estimate. I know about how fast the chariot traveled coming down. . . .The trouble is, time does not exist here. I have no day, no stars, no clock but my heartbeat, and I have lost the count of that. Nevertheless, we must come to the end soon. What purpose would be served by walking me through this labyrinth till I die?

Well, if I am totally exhausted at the outer gate, I won't make undue trouble when I find no Rose-in-Hand behind me.

No, now that's ridiculous. If SUM didn't want to heed my plea, It need merely say so. I have no power to inflict physical damage on Its parts.

Of course, It might have plans for me. It did speak of reconditioning. A series of shocks, culminating in that last one, could make me ready for whatever kind of gelding It intends to do.

Or It might have changed Its mind. Why not? It was quite frank about an uncertainty factor in the human psyche. It may have re-evaluated the probabilities and decided: better not to serve my desire.

Or It may have tried, and failed. It admitted the recording process is imperfect. I must not expect quite the Gladness I

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knew; she will always be a little haunted. At best. But suppose the tank spawned a body with no awareness behind the eyes? Or a monster? Suppose, at this instant, I am being followed by a half-rotten corpse?

No! Stop that! SUM would know, and take corrective measures. Would It? *Can It?*

I comprehend how this passage through night, where I never look to see what follows me, how this is an act of submission and confession. I am saying, with my whole existent being, that SUM is all-powerful, all-wise, all-good. To SUM I offer the love I came to win back. Oh, It looked more deeply into me than ever I did myself.

But I shall not fail.

Will SUM, though? If there has indeed been some grisly error. . .let me not find it out under the sky. Let her, my only, not. For what then shall we do? Could I lead her here again, knock on the iron gate, and cry, "Master, You have given me a thing unfit to exist. Destroy it and start over."—? For what might the wrongness be? Something so subtle, so pervasive, that it does not show in any way save my slow, resisted discovery that I embrace a zombie? Doesn't it make better sense to look—make certain while she is yet drowsy with death—use the whole power of SUM to correct what may be awry?

No, SUM wants me to believe that It makes no mistakes. I agreed to that price. And to much else. . .I don't know how much else, I am daunted to imagine, but that word "recondition" is ugly. . . . Does not my woman have some rights in the matter too? Shall we not at least ask her if she wants to be the wife of a prophet; shall we not, hand in hand, ask SUM what the price of her life is to her?

Was that a footfall? Almost, I whirl about. I check myself and stand shaking; names of hers break from my lips. The robot urges me on.

Imagination. It wasn't her step. I am alone. I will always be alone.

The halls wind upward. Or so I think; I have grown too weary for much kinesthetic sense. We cross the sounding river, and I am bitten to the bone by the cold which blows upward around the bridge, and I may not turn about to offer the naked newborn woman my garment. I lurch through endless chambers where machines do meaningless things. She hasn't seen them before. Into what nightmare has she risen; and why don't I, who wept into her dying senses that I loved her, why don't I look at her, why don't I speak?

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Well, I could talk to her. I could assure the puzzled mute dead that I have come to lead her back into sunlight. Could I not? I ask the robot. It does not reply. I cannot remember if I may speak to her. If indeed I was ever told. I stumble forward.

I crash into a wall and fall bruised. The robot's claw closes on my shoulder. Another arm gestures. I see a passageway, very long and narrow, through the stone. I will have to crawl through. At the end, at the end, the door is swinging wide. The dear real dusk of Earth pours through into this darkness. I am blinded and deafened.

Do I hear her cry out? Was that the final testing; or was my own sick, shaken mind betraying me; or is there a destiny which, like SUM with us, makes tools of suns and SUM? I don't know. I know only that I turned, and there she stood. Her hair flowed long, loose, past the remembered face from which the trance was just departing, on which the knowing and the love of me had just awakened—flowed down over the body that reached forth arms, that took one step to meet me and was halted.

The great grim robot at her own back takes her to it. I think it sends lightning through her brain. She falls. It bears her away.

My guide ignores my screaming. Irresistible, it thrusts me out through the tunnel. The door clangs in my face. I stand before the wall which is like a mountain. Dry snow hisses across concrete. The sky is bloody with dawn; stars still gleam in the west, and arc lights are scattered over the twilit plain of the machines.

Presently I go dumb. I become almost calm. What is there left to have feelings about? The door is iron, the wall is stone fused into one basaltic mass. I walk some distance off into the wind, turn around, lower my head and charge. Let my brains be smeared across Its gate; the pattern will be my hieroglyphic for hatred.

I am seized from behind. The force that stops me must needs be bruisingly great. Released, I crumple to the ground before a machine with talons and wings. My voice from it says, "Not here. I'll carry you to a safe place."

"What more can You do to me?" I croak.

"Release you. You won't be restrained or molested on any orders of Mine."

"Why not?"

"Obviously you're going to appoint yourself My enemy forever. This is an unprecedented situation, a valuable chance to collect data."

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"You tell me this, You warn me, deliberately?"

"Of course. My computation is that these words will have the effect of provoking your utmost effort."

"You won't give her again? You don't want my love?"

"Not under the circumstances. Too uncontrollable. But your hatred should, as I say, be a useful experimental tool."

"I'll destroy You," I say.

It does not deign to speak further. Its machine picks me up and flies off with me. I am left on the fringes of a small town further south. Then I go insane.

I do not much know what happens during that winter, nor care. The blizzards are too loud in my head. I walk the ways of Earth, among lordly towers, under neatly groomed trees, into careful gardens, over bland, bland campuses. I am unwashed, uncombed, unbarbered; my tatters flap about me and my bones are near thrusting through the skin; folks do not like to meet these eyes sunken so far into this skull, and perhaps for that reason they give me to eat. I sing to them.

"From the hag and hungry goblin
That into rags would rend ye
And the spirit that stan'd by the naked man
In the Book of Moons defend ye!
That of your five sound senses
You never be forsaken
Nor travel from yourselves with Tom
Abroad to beg your bacon."

Such things perturb them, do not belong in their chrome-edged universe. So I am often driven away with curses, and sometimes I must flee those who would arrest me and scrub my brain smooth. An alley is a good hiding place, if I can find one in the oldest part of a city; I crouch there and yowl with the cats. A forest is also good. My pursuers dislike any place where any wildness lingers.

But some feel otherwise. They have visited parklands, preserves, actual wildcountry. Their purpose was overconscious—measured, plannned savagery, and a clock to tell them when they must go home—but at least they are not afraid of silences and unlighted nights. As spring returns, certain among them begin to follow me. They are merely curious, at first. But slowly, month by month, especially among the younger ones, my madness begins to call to something in them.

With an host of furious fancies

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Whereof I am commander
With a burning spear, and a horse of air,
To the wilderness I wander.
By a knight of ghosts and shadows
I summoned am to tourney
Ten leagues beyond the wide world's edge.
Me thinks it is no journey."

They sit at my feet and listen to me sing. They dance, crazily, to my harp. The girls bend close, tell me how I fascinate them, invite me to copulate. This I refuse, and when I tell them why, they are puzzled, a litle frightened maybe, but often they strive to understand.

For my rationality is renewed with the hawthorn blossoms. I bathe, have my hair and beard shorn, find clean raiment, and take care to eat what my body needs. Less and less do I rave before anyone who will listen; more and more do I seek solitude, quietness, under the vast wheel of the stars, and think.

What is man? Why is man? We have buried such questions; we have sworn they are dead—that they never really existed, being devoid of empirical meaning—and we have dreaded that they might raise the stones we heaped on them, rise and walk the world again of nights. Alone, I summon them to me. They cannot hurt their fellow dead, among whom I now number myself.

I sing to her who is gone. The young people hear and wonder. Sometimes they weep.

"Fear no more the heat o'the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust."

"But this is not so!" they protest. "We will die and sleep a while, and then we will live forever in SUM."

I answer as gently as may be: "No. Remember I went there. So I know you are wrong. And even if you were right, it would not be right that you should be right."

"What?"

"Don't you see, it is not right that a thing should be the lord of man. It is not right that we should huddle through our whole lives in fear of finally losing them. You are not parts in a machine, and you have better ends than helping the machine run smoothly."

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I dismiss them and stride off, solitary again, into a canyon where a river clangs, or onto some gaunt mountain peak. No revelation is given me. I climb and creep toward the truth.

Which is that SUM must be destroyed, not in revenge, not in hate, not in fear, simply because the human spirit cannot exist in the same reality as It.

But what, then, is our proper reality? And how shall we attain to it?

I return with my songs to the lowlands. Word about me has gone widely. They are a large crowd who follow me down the highroad until it has changed into a street.

"The Dark Queen will soon come to these parts," they tell me. "Abide till She does. Let Her answer those questions you put to us, which make us sleep so badly."

"Let me retire to prepare myself," I say. I got up a long flight of steps. The people watch from below, dumb with awe, till I vanish. Such few as were in the building depart. I walk down vaulted halls, through hushed high-ceilinged rooms full of tables, among shelves made massive by books. Sunlight slants dusty through the windows.

The half memory has plagued me of late: once before, I know not when, this year of mine also took place. Perhaps in this library I can find the tale that—casually, I suppose, in my abnormal childhood—I read. For man is older than SUM: wiser, I swear; his myths hold more truth than Its mathematics. I spend three days and most of three nights in my search. There is little sound but the rustling of leaves between my hands. Folk place offerings of food and drink at the door. They tell themselves they do so out of pity, or curiosity, or to avoid the nuisance of having me die in an unconventional fashion. But I know better.

At the end of the three days I am little further along. I have too much material; I keep going off on sidetracks of beauty and fascination. (Which SUM means to eliminate.) My education was like everyone else's, science, rationality, good sane adjustment. (SUM writes our curricula, and the teaching machines have direct connections to It.) Well, I can make some of my lopsided training work for me. My reading has given me sufficient clues to prepare a search program. I sit down before an information retrieval console and run my fingers across its keys. They make a clattery music.

Electron beams are swift hounds. Within seconds the screen lights up with words, and I read who I am.

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It is fortunate that I am a fast reader. Before I can press the *CLEAR* button, the unreeling words are wiped out. For an instant the screen quivers with formlessness, then appears:

I HAD NOT CORRELATED THESE DATA WITH THE FACTS CONCERNING YOU. THIS INTRODUCES A NEW AND INDETERMINATE QUANTITY INTO THE COMPUTATIONS.

The nirvana which has come upon me (yes, I found that word among the old books, and how portentous it is) is not passiveness, it is a tide more full and strong than that which bore me down to the Dark Queen those ages apast in wildcountry. I say, as coolly as may be, "An interesting coincidence. If it is a coincidence." Surely sonic receptors are emplaced here.

EITHER THAT, OR A CERTAIN NECESSARY CONSEQUENCE OF THE LOGIC OF EVENTS.

The vision dawning within me is so blinding bright that I cannot refrain from answering, "Or a destiny, SUM?"

MEANINGLESS. MEANINGLESS. MEANINGLESS.

"Now why did You repeat Yourself in that way? Once would have sufficed. Thrice, though, makes an incantation. Are You by any chance hoping Your words will make me stop existing?"

I DO NOT HOPE. YOU ARE AN EXPERIMENT. IF I COMPUTE A SIGNIFICANT PROBABILITY OF YOUR CAUSING SERIOUS DISTURBANCE, I WILL HAVE YOU TERMINATED.

I smile. "SUM," I say, "I am going to terminate You." I lean over and switch off the screen. I walk out into the evening.

Not everything is clear to me yet, that I must say and do. But enough is that I can start preaching at once to those who have been waiting for me. As I talk, others come down the street, and hear, and stay to listen. Soon they number in the hundreds.

I have no immense new truth to offer them: nothing that I have not said before, although piecemeal and unsystematically; nothing they have not felt themselves, in the innermost darknesses of their beings. Today, however, knowing who I am and therefore why I am, I can put these things in words. Speaking quietly, now and then drawing on some forgotten song to show my meaning, I tell them how sick and starved their lives are; how they have made themselves slaves; how the enslavement is not even to a conscious mind, but to an insensate inanimate thing which their own ancestors began; how that thing is not the centrum of existence, but a few scraps of

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metal and bleats of energy, a few sad stupid patterns, adrift in unbounded space-time. Put not your faith in SUM, I tell them. SUM is doomed, even as you and I. Seek out mystery; what else is the whole cosmos but mystery? Live bravely, die and be done, and you will be more than any machine. You may perhaps be God.

They grow tumultuous. They shout replies, some of which are animal howls. A few are for me, most are opposed. That doesn't matter. I have reached into them, my music is being played on their nerve-strings, and this is my entire purpose.

The Sun goes down behind the buildings. Dusk gathers. The city remains unilluminated. I soon realize why. She is coming, the Dark Queen Whom they wanted me to debate with. From afar we hear Her chariot thunder. Folk wail in terror. They are not wont to do that either. They used to disguise their feelings from Her and themselves by receiving Her with grave, sparse ceremony. Now they would flee if they dared. I have lifted the masks.

The chariot halts in the street. She dismounts, tall and shadowy cowled. The people make way before Her like water before a shark. She climbs the stairs to face me. I see for the least instant that Her lips are not quite firm and Her eyes abrim with tears. She whispers, too low for anyone else to hear, "Oh, Harper, I'm sorry."

"Come join me," I invite. "Help me set the world free."

"No. I cannot. I have been too long with It." She straightens. Imperium descends upon Her. Her voice rises for everyone to hear. The little television robots flit close, bat shapes in the twilight, that the whole planet may witness my defeat. "What is this freedom you rant about?" She demands.

"To feel," I say. "To venture. To wonder. To become men again."

"To become beasts, you mean. Would you demolish the machines that keep us alive?"

"Yes. We must. Once they were good and useful, but we let them grow upon us like a cancer, and now nothing but destruction and a new beginning can save us."

"Have you considered the chaos?"

"Yes. It too is necessary. We will not be men without the freedom to know suffering. In it is also enlightenment. Through it we travel beyond ourselves, beyond earth and stars, space and time, to Mystery."

"So you maintain that there is some undefined ultimate vagueness behind the measurable universe?" She smiles into

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the bat eyes. We have each been taught, as children, to laugh on hearing sarcasms of this kind. "Please offer me a little proof."

"No," I say. "Prove to me instead, beyond any doubt, that there is *not* something we cannot understand with words and equations. Prove to me likewise that I have no right to seek for it.

"The burden of proof is on You Two, so often have You lied to us. In the name of rationality, You resurrected myth. The better to control us! In the name of liberation, You chained our inner lives and castrated our souls. In the name of service, You bound and blinkered us. In the name of achievement, You held us to a narrower round than any swine in its pen. In the name of beneficence, You created pain, and horror, and darkness beyond darkness." I turn to the people. "I went there. I descended into the cellars. I know!"

"He found that SUM would not pander to his special wishes, at the expense of everyone else," cries the Dark Queen. Do I hear shrillness in Her voice? "Therefore he claims SUM is cruel."

"I saw my dead," I tell them. "She will not rise again. Nor yours, nor you. Not ever. SUM will not, cannot raise us. In Its house is death indeed. We must seek life and rebirth elsewhere, among the mysteries."

She laughs aloud and points to my soul bracelet, glimmering faintly in the gray-blue thickening twilight. Need She say anything?

"Will someone give me a knife and an ax?" I ask.

The crowd stirs and mumbles. I smell their fear. Street lamps go on, as if they could scatter more than this corner of the night which is rolling upon us. I fold my arms and wait. The Dark Queen says something to me. I ignore Her.

The tools pass from hand to hand. He who brings them up the stairs comes like a flame. He kneels at my feet and lifts what I have desired. The tools are good ones, a broad-bladed hunting knife and a long double-bitted ax.

Before the world, I take the knife in my right hand and slash beneath the bracelet on my left wrist. The connections to my inner body are cut. Blood flows, impossibly brilliant under the lamps. It does not hurt; I am too exalted.

The Dark Queen shrieks. "You meant it! Harper, Harper!"

"There is no life in SUM," I say. I pull my hand through the circle and cast the bracelet down so it rings.

A voice of brass: "*Arrest*

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that maniac for correction. He is deadly dangerous."

The monitors who have stood on the fringes of the crowd try to push through. They are resisted. Those who seek to help them encounter fists and fingernails.

I take the ax and smash downward. The bracelet crumples. The organic material within, starved of my secretions, exposed to the night air, withers.

I raise the tools, ax in right hand, knife in bleeding left. "I seek eternity where it is to be found," I call. "Who goes with me?"

A score or better break loose from the riot, which is already calling forth weapons and claiming lives. They surround me with their bodies. Their eyes are the eyes of prophets. We make haste to seek a hiding place, for one military robot has appeared and others will not be long in coming. The tall engine strides to stand guard over Our Lady, and this is my last glimpse of Her.

My followers do not reproach me for having cost them all they were. They are mine. In me is the godhead which can do no wrong.

And the war is open, between me and SUM. My friends are few, my enemies many and mighty. I go about the world as a fugitive. But always I sing. And always I find someone who will listen, will join us, embracing pain and death like a lover.

With the Knife and the Ax I take their souls. Afterward we hold for them the ritual of rebirth. Some go thence to become outlaw missionaries; most put on facsimile bracelets and return home, to whisper my word. It makes little difference to me. I have no haste, who own eternity.

For my word is of what lies beyond time. My enemies say I call forth ancient bestialities and lunacies; that I would bring civilization down in ruin; that it matters not a madman's giggle to me whether war, famine, and pestilence will again scour the earth. With these accusations I am satisfied. The language of them shows me that here, too, I have reawakened anger. And that emotion belongs to us as much as any other. More than the others, maybe, in this autumn of mankind. We need a gale, to strike down SUM and everything It stands for. Afterward will come the winter of barbarism.

And after that the springtime of a new and (perhaps) more human civilization. My friends seem to believe this will come in their very lifetimes: peace, brotherhood, enlightenment, sanctity. I know otherwise. I have been in the depths.

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The wholeness of mankind, which I am bringing back, has its horrors.

When one day
the Eater of the Gods returns
the Wolf breaks his chain
the Horsemen ride forth
the Age ends
the Beast is reborn

then SUM will be destroyed; and you, strong and fair, may go back to earth and rain.

I shall await you.

My aloneness is nearly ended, Daybright. Just one task remains. The god must die, that his followers may believe he is raised from the dead and lives forever. Then they will go on to conquer the world.

There are those who say I have spurned and offended them. They too, borne on the tide which I raised, have torn out their machine souls and seek in music and ecstasy to find a meaning for existence. But their creed is a savage one, which has taken them into wildcountry, where they ambush the monitors sent against them and practice cruel rites. They believe that the final reality is female. Nevertheless, messengers of theirs have approached me with the suggestion of a mystic marriage. This I refused; my wedding was long ago, and will be celebrated again when this cycle of the world has closed. Therefore they hate me. But I have said I will come and talk to them.

I leave the road at the bottom of the valley and walk singing up the hill. Those few I let come this far with me have been told to abide my return. They shiver in the sunset; the vernal equinox is three days away. I feel no cold myself. I stride exultant among briars and twisted ancient apple trees. If my bare feet leave a little blood in the snow, that is good. The ridges around are dark with forest, which waits like the skeleton dead for leaves to be breathed across it again. The eastern sky is purple, where stands the evening star. Overhead, against blue, cruises an early flight of homebound geese. Their calls drift faintly down to me. Westward, above me and before me, smolders redness. Etched black against it are the women.

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JAMES BLISH

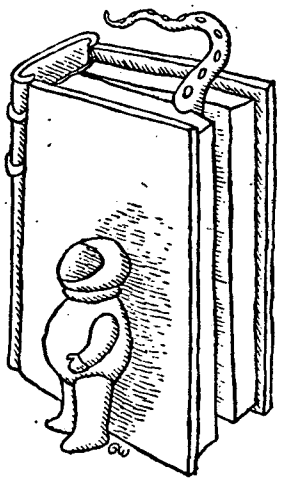
BOOKS

SCIENCE FICTION: THE FUTURE, ed. Dick Allen; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $3.50

TACTICS OF MISTAKE, Gordon R. Dickson; Doubleday, $4.95

THE FLAME IS GREEN, R.A. Lafferty; Walker, $5.95

The LOST FACE, Josef Nesvadba; Taplinger, $5.95



WE ARE CONFRONTED first this time by an anthology specifically designed to be a college text, with the usual apparatus of prefaces, blurbs, set questions to be answered after every selection, "Topics for writing and research," and "Suggestions for further reading." SCIENCE FICTION: THE FUTURE is divided into three sections. "First Perspectives" contains two excellent poems by Richard Wilbur and George MacBeth, two articles (one of them from *Time*), and a famous story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, all dealing in one way or another with technological crises. Part two, "Alternative Futures," is subdivided into "The Present as Future" and "The Future," which neatly separates works exaggerating current dilemmas from stories which, for the most part, offer real alternatives or have no sociological significance. There's a poem included here, too. Finally, we have a section called "Theories," which consists of six essays about science fiction itself.

If you have been reading the science-fiction magazines and anthologies of the last twenty or so years—even if you've only made their acquaintance in the past five—there'll be very little in this book that is new to you.

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If on the other hand you're looking for a single anthology which sums up the most seminal achievements of modern sf in its best years (and is free of works by big names from the mainstream included to make the field look respectable), you would be better off with Doubleday's SCIENCE FICTION HALL OF FAME, edited by Robert Silverberg from nominations made by SFWA members. As a college text the Allen collection is comprehensive, well organized, and contains an immense amount of material for its price. . .and probably does do a good job of making us look respectable, as well; but most of the points it makes, and the questions it asks, are ones that most of us have encountered long ago. It will probably find its way into your public or university library.

The Dickson novel, which was serialized recently in *Analog*, takes place in the universe of the Dorsai, professional soldiers for hire who first turned up in a novel called *Dorsai* in the same magazine, and later from Ace retitled THE GENETIC GENERAL. Both, I would guess, were responses to the late John W. Campbell's final new policy for his magazine, which was to emphasize heroes who set out to accomplish something and by gum succeeded at it.

Of the two novels, the second is slightly the poorer of the two, since it carries the policy to its ultimate extreme: in the course of a whole series of highly complex psychological, military and political maneuvers, the hero, Lt. Col. Cletus Grahame, never makes a mistake. We first meet him as a young officer of the armed forces of one of the two Earthly superpowers, the Western Alliance (the other is called the Eastern Coalition, and they're hard to keep straight), successfully setting out to capture the attention of a high Coalition official who, he correctly judges, will eventually become the head man of both superpowers at once. By the end of the novel, he is himself the number one man of the Dorsai, with whose help he has broken the hold of the Earth powers upon their colonies, which, it turns out, is what he had been aiming at right from the beginning.

He is presented first as a scholar who is in the process of writing volume four of a 20-volume work on strategy and tactics, but it is also established almost at once that he was a hero during the only three months of combat he had seen up to that time. He has had himself transferred to a

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world where the Alliance and the Coalition are fighting a brush war in order to put his theories into practice, and forthwith proves himself, over and over again, to be an unorthodox but uniformly successful field officer.

Along the way, he is given training in a rather yoga-like discipline which gives him extraordinary control over his body—a discipline which he proceeds to pass on to his men, thus vastly improving their usefulness in combat and extending the range of the surprise tactics he can call upon. Dickson never directly calls Grahame a superman, but in most respects he's not very far behind Heinlein's Michael Valentine Smith, and does pull off one feat which Dickson quite openly calls a miracle.

The writing is highly competent, as was to have been expected of Dickson; and despite the fact that the reader will soon suspect (presuming I hadn't given it away already) that Grahame isn't going to fail in anything he undertakes, the situations are so complicated and imaginative and there is so much action that it kept me continuously interested despite the lack of suspense. I ought to add, however, that my wife found the emphasis on military matters so heavy that she couldn't finish the book, despite being a Dickson fan of long standing. And by its very nature it has nothing of substance to offer; it is simply a carefully crafted action story which doesn't invite re-reading—what is on the surface is all there is of it.

Minor enough, I think, to justify waiting for the paperback.

Lafferty's current contribution is announced as the beginning of a tetralogy and I await the next volume with mild curiosity in the hope of finding out what the hell it's all about. I suppose it can be called a historical fantasy; the backdrop consists of the various revolutions that were going on in Europe beginning in 1845, but most of the characters have magical powers (chiefly, clairvoyance), and the villain of the piece is a son of the Devil, who is mistakenly left for dead on the last page.

If you want some information about and feeling for the real struggles of the mid-1800's, you won't get it here. They are almost all seen through the eyes of the fey young Irish hero, Dana Coscuin, who doesn't understand anything that's going on at any point. He has allowed himself, for no reason, to be launched into the service of and a search for a mysterious Count Cyril, who never appears,

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but who seems to be the key figure in a Green Revolution (good) which underlines the various national revolutions, as does a Red Revolution (evil). During his travels, Dana meets, selectively recruits and in one instance marries a number of characters who though well differentiated otherwise, all talk a high-flown, insistently metaphorical, mystical jargon which goes in ellipses around what they are trying to say and what they are thinking, if anything. (Except, that is, when they are making one of their unfailingly accurate predictions.)

These windy and opaque counsels push Dana into a series of violent and/or amatory episodes and encounters which seem to have no connection with each other except time and the fulfilling of the prophecies. The atmosphere of fantasy is pervasive, but chiefly through the irritating elusiveness of the language; even a long, Sabbat-like party with the son of the Devil, the most fantastic episode in the book, comes out in a wordy blur: "There was loud degradation that cannot be put into words, and shortened or distorted time." The hell to which the characters are temporarily admitted here is a realization of the contents of their own unconscious minds, a most interesting and attractive notion with which practically nothing is done.

Like this author's FOURTH MANSIONS, the intent of the work this far seems to be that of a spiritual pilgrimage through symbolic events, another journey toward the Grail; but unlike the previous novel, the symbolism does not seem to be systematized, the protagonists and antagonists don't fall into well-defined groups, and their motives are either cloudy or are not given at all. The net effect is that of a writer hypnotizedly beating his way deeper and deeper into a purely private world which threatens in the end to become entirely meaningless to anyone else, and perhaps even to himself.

Dedicated Lafferty fans will probably want to buy this book before it goes out of print in the hope that the overall opus when completed will pull some rabbit of deep meaning out of its vaporous hat. Other readers are warned off; nearly six dollars is too much to spend for a reward of befuddled impatience—which is what the book left me with, anyhow.

Josef Nesvadba is a Czech physician whose science-fiction stories have been widely published in both Eastern Europe and the West (including in the pages of F&SF and in Darko Suvin's OTHER WORLDS,

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OTHER SEAS). His work does not have the persistently optimistic tone of much sf published in Communist countries, especially in the USSR, and as a result seems a good deal more modern.

The present volume is a reprint of one published in 1964, presumbably in England, under the title of IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE ABOMINABLE SNOWMAN, which is also the name of the last of the eight novelettes in it. It has a few surface peculiarities. One is that some of the stories contain series of subheads, reminiscent (accidentally, no doubt) of the old Gernsback *Amazing Stories*. Another is that not one of the stories deals with space flight; reflecting the author's daytime job, most of them are centered on aspects of biology, a science usually slighted in Western sf.

One of the best, "The Trial Nobody Ever Heard of," is only marginally science fiction at all. It does include the discovery of a powerful war gas which the inventor at first refuses to turn over to his government; but the meat of the story is a series of maneuvers, culminating in a near-murder, which parallels a little, event for event, the outbreak of World War One. While I doubt that anybody today would maintain that that war was really about anything, or accomplished anything but evil, the point has universal application and is ingeniously made.

More characteristic is the volume's title story, the gimmick of which is the discovery and use of a technique of plastic surgery which allows a dead man's face to be superimposed upon that of a living man. Inexorably, the recipient finds himself driven, mostly but not entirely by circumstances, into living the life of the donor. Superficially, this might be taken as a parable of the fatal power of the assumption that things are what they seem, but I think also that Nesvadba is re-using here the theme of Kafka's METAMORPHOSIS; that contrary to Nineteenth-Century assumptions, the brain is at the mercy of the body (as concentration-camp experiences and the later development of brainwashing have since gruesomely proved). It is powerfully and circumstantialy told, and also brings off a difficult technical feat: The author tells you the ending first of all, and then leads you back to it, by which time it has completely changed from ordinary melodrama to a situation packed with irony.

"Expedition in the Opposite Direction" deals with a more conventional sf subject, time travel, but handled in a way

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quite new to me. The narrator, after experiencing a whole series of major and minor disasters, finds himself just 24 hours in his own past (as the story's title indicates, this was an experiment that misfired; he had been shooting for the future). Himself as he had been during the 24 hours no longer exists, so he has the opportunity to see to it that this day, at least, will not go the way he remembers its having happened. He has free will, hasn't he? Well, yes, it turns out that he does, but the price for it turns out to be even more disastrously high.

It is a little unfortunate that the weakest story in the book, "The Death of an Apeman," is also the first one. It is a re-telling of the Tarzan story, with a tragic end dictated by the adoption of a Swiftian contrast between chimpanzee and human societies. But it has virtues of its own, so I needn't ask you not to be put off from the rest of the book by it.

Swift very heavily influenced H. G. Wells' early science-fiction novels, so it's not too surprising to find a story here entitled "Dr. Moreau's Other Island." Though, as noted above, there is no space flight in the collection, it is mentioned in this one, but it is quite incidental to the story's real theme, that of the obsessed man as a self-mutilated one.

Despite these traces of other people—and after all, every author has ancestors; what counts is that he has the privilege of choosing them, and how well he exercises it—Nesvadba is an original in our field and well worth your attention. I have never heard of his publishers here, but they have my gratitude.

Coming soon

Next month's feature story is LOVE IS A DRAGONFLY, a complete short novel by **Thomas Burnett Swann**, who will be remembered for his superior fantasies, THE MANOR OF ROSES and THE GOAT WITHOUT HORNS, both of which appeared in these pages during the past few years. Also along next month or soon after will be short stories by **John Christopher, Frederik Pohl, Gene Wolfe** and **Anthony Boucher.** And in April: our Special **James Blish** issue—more about that next month.

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The fact that New York and other cities are rapidly becoming knee-deep in dog droppings is perhaps not the nation's number one problem; still, it's the sort of thing that lends itself to a bit of extrapolation. We *have* been getting a lot of stories about dog overpopulation, but none of them seemed to strike quite the right note — until Mrs. Reed, bless her, came through with this perfect *reductio ad absurdum* account.

Dog Days

by KIT REED

COMING HOME THROUGH the park that afternoon, Norton Enfield was both glad and sorry he didn't have Dirk along. As long as they kept Dirk hidden at home, the dog was safe and so was everything in the apartment. As Myrna would say, the loss of his pocket money would be little enough to pay. Furthermore, Enfield was never quite comfortable with the dog; Dirk moved with velvet grace, barely suffering Enfield's hand upon his leash, and he had to admit that he felt more at home facing muggers and deviates and other assorted perils than he did under the dog's unwavering yellow gaze. He had always been made uneasy by the Doberman's aura of compressed power, the glittering teeth, and the steel spring muscles under the glistening hide. Dirk would watch him and Myrna, looking from one to the other as they spoke, and more than once Enfield had drawn his wife into the kitchen so that they could have a word alone, because he could not fight down the growing conviction that the dog understood and disapproved of everything he said. Still, with Dirk along, Enfield would not have lost his wallet, no mugger would have dared attack him, and they certainly would not have beaten him up; instead, Enfield would have had the pleasure of watching Dirk rip their throats out before either of them could cry for help.

He had left Dirk home because Myrna insisted: the pollution squads were fanning

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ever wider on their search and destroy missions, and there were civilian vigilantes with nets and loaded automatics lurking behind every bush. As he left the apartment, it had crossed his mind that if he lost Dirk he and Myrna would be alone at last, but Myrna had said, simply, "You're not taking Dirk, not with things the way they are," and the dog had shown a sliver of teeth in the beginning of a snarl.

Dirk was Myrna's dog, really; she had brought him home after she was mugged in the elevator for the fourth time in a week. Enfield had come home from work to find her in the living room with a spindly legged puppy which did not slobber or galumph the way puppies were supposed to, but instead lifted its head like a racehorse and looked at him out of one white-ringed eye.

"What's that?"

"My protection." Myrna was coiled on the floor next to the dog, looking up at him through a fall of dark, glossy hair. "Isn't he adorable?"

The dog's head was diamond shaped, like a serpent's head, and it gave him a mature, calculating look. Enfield said, "What's his name?"

And Myrna, who had always called Enfield Norty, and mocked him for not having a name like a dagger, said, "Dirk. He's sweet, he's a beautiful boy. Dirk Storm."

"Now I suppose you're going to put off having the baby."

"Just for a while." Silken, graceful in some of the same ways the pup was, she had tilted her head. "After all, he *is* going to have to be trained."

So the dog had been Myrna's from the beginning, and it watched Enfield's every move with calculation, straining forward on its haunches when Enfield moved to embrace his wife, growling deep in its throat when Enfield raised his voice. More than once he had waked with a start, almost certain he heard it breathing somewhere in the room, and he could not embrace his wife in bed without thinking of the dog. Even though Dirk was locked in the kitchen, Enfield could not free himself of the image of the dog poised on the dresser, ready to spring at the slightest untoward move. Even though Dirk had saved him from a mugging more than once and had savaged a burglar in the foyer and so perhaps saved his life, Enfield had always regarded Dirk with mixed emotions, and so it was with mixed emotions that he had watched the civilian vigilantes go into action, and he could not share Myrna's chagrin when the mayor chose his Sunday night music show to announce the creation of what

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he euphemistically called the antipollution squad.

"It's *murder.*" Myrna couldn't stop crying. "It's like the concentration camps."

"The dogs are sticking to the sidewalks, Myrna. We're knee-deep in droppings, and they're tearing little kids to pieces in the streets."

"Their mothers ought to take better care of them."

"I'm afraid it's gotten beyond that," Enfield had said. "It's gotten out of hand."

So it was that as he came home through the park this particular evening he could hear the sound of distant shots and yelps of pain, snarling and outraged outcries, and, nearby, a howl which rose amid the other sounds, twining around the others in incalculable woe. As he rounded the last bend, Enfield came upon the source: an old lady with her nose raised and her throat swelled in anguish over the corpse of a pet Pekingese.

"He never barked," she said when he tried to calm her, "and he never bit anybody and he hardly ever pooped, at least not so a person would notice, and I was ever so careful about him, I picked it all up with my little silver trowel, and I would take it home and flush it down the toilet and oh oh oh," she said and lapsed into an open-throated, inarticulate howl.

"I'm sure he meant a great deal to you, Madam," Enfield said, because he would do anything he could to get her to stop howling. "Perhaps you could have him stuffed."

"Stuffed," she cried, "stuffed," and Enfield backed away quickly; she had turned on him, in another minute she was going to tear him apart.

On the avenue, another distraught dog owner fought for his life; the pollution squad had gotten his animal, and a wild dog pack had fallen upon the corpse. Now they were finished and they had turned on him, still lusting for blood. Enfield looked around for a stick or a rock, anything to help him, but there was nothing. "Save yourself," the man cried, disappearing into a maelstrom of fangs and claws. Enfield cast a quick look around for the pollution squad, thinking they might be able to do something, but they must have piled into that yellow van and disappeared the minute they had done their job. After all, it was safer to go after dogs on leashes than it was to risk wind and limb going after the wild packs which hid out in the park. It was easier to follow the letter of the law and fall upon the attack-trained toy poodle, or the fat cocker spaniel following meekly on a leash. Most dog owners kept their pets inside now, or walked

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them under cover of night, hoping to elude the squads, which patrolled 'round the clock. When the squad swooped down and did its duty, the owner would stare uncomprehendingly at the empty collar, the slack leash, saying, "But he begged and begged, I just had to bring him out." Those with strength of character had already freed their dogs, hoping they would be able to survive in the park. They might sneak down for an occasional midnight rendezvous; with luck they might get in a few words with the beloved pet before they had to break and run, fleeing the wild packs. Enfield wondered if Dirk would care enough to rendezvous with him or Myrna, but he knew better; at times it seemed to him that they lived to serve the dog, rather than the dog serving them.

From behind him he heard snarling and sounds which were even more sinister. It's dog-eat-dog in this day and time and that's the truth, he thought, and launched himself on the avenue.

He found it hard going; traffic had stopped moving some weeks before, which meant he had to vault rusting Volkswagens and climb over taxi bumpers to get to the other side. Abandoned automobiles took up so much room that the dogs were confined to the sidewalks, and by this time they were thick with ordure, studded with an occasional carcass and whorled with traces of scenes of gallantry or carnage, depending. Since the mayor's announcement, Sanitation had been put on the extermination detail, and there seemed to be no keeping up with the problem after that. The program was in its fifth week now, and the damnable thing was that conditions seemed to be not better but worse. The strays had mushroomed in number, and in addition to everything else, a number of humans had taken to using the sidewalks and the parks as toilets as part of a radical movement designed to prove some kind of point.

Perhaps driven by their lack of success, the pollution squads were becoming more and more thorough and ruthless; they had begun lurking at the doorways to buildings, bribing the doormen to tip them off as to how many dogs lived there and when their owners were liable to bring them outside. At Myrna's insistence, Enfield had kept Dirk inside from the beginning. She seemed to have the idea that out of sight also meant out of mind, and she had done her best to exercise the dog inside the apartment, teaching it to jump over the coffee table, ricochet against the front door

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and then spring into another leap. She bridled defensively when Enfield looked at the dog with even an indication of doubt, and she was determined to teach the dog to use the toilet. Enfield supposed they would weather this crisis as they had so many others, but he did not like the look the dog had developed, as if it was fully aware of the menace outside, or its fine-tuned nervousness, or the restless way it paced now that it had been denied the park. The dog, Enfield had decided, was just about to explode, and he had also decided on his way home this afternoon that he would seek the tactful moment and then slip a little poison in its dish; he had the stuff in his pocket now. Myrna need never know, and despite their subsequent vulnerability to muggers and marauders, he was convinced they would be better off.

Myrna met him at the door. "Did you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"They aren't picking up enough dogs in the street. They're starting to go door to door."

Enfield looked past her at Dirk; the dog was sitting in his favorite chair, regarding him with a look so savage that he said, "Well, we're going to have to. . ."

She put her hands on his lips. "Shhh, he understands."

He gave the dog a sharp look; Dirk licked his chops. Enfield began spelling:

"W-E-'R-E G-O-I-N-G T-O H-A-V-E T-O L-E-T T-H-E-M T-A-K-E H-I-M."

She gave him a desperate, walleyed look. "He'd never let us. . ."

The dog jerked its head around.

Enfield said, "Shh."

"We'll never let them have him," Myrna said, too loud. "Did you hear that, Dirk? We'll never let them have you. . ." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "They're in the building now."

"Then they're going to get here sooner or later," Enfield said; he had the uncanny feeling that the dog knew about the poison in his pocket, "and if they do, W-E-'R-E G-O-I-N-G T-O. . ."

"No," she said, shaking her head, "I've been working on something."

The dog leapt from the chair and came to stand beside her.

The three of them jumped at the sound of thunderous knocking.

"It's them," Enfield said, and then, "what's that?"

Myrna had produced a furry object. "It's your costume."

"You're kidding."

The knocking at the door had turned to splintering kicks; in another minute they would break it down.

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Myrna looked from him to the dog, which snarled. "No, I'm not kidding, Norty, it's either you or him."

"But I'm your husband." Enfield saw with alarm that there was a robe of his laid out on the couch, along with an ascot and a towel to shroud the head. "Honey, can't you. . ."

The dog crouched to spring.

"I'm sorry, he won't let me." The door was giving way. She proffered the dog suit, loving but inexorable. "I think you'd better put this on."

COLLECTOR'S ITEM: Autographed Special Poul Anderson Issue

Our April 1971 issue honored one of science fiction's most popular and respected writers, Poul Anderson. Mr. Anderson has signed a limited number of copies of this issue — less than 200 in all — and we are offering them at $2.00 each.

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Here is a very short and very poignant story from Pamela Sargent ("Landed Minority," September 1970). Since her last appearance here, Miss Sargent has sold stories to NEW WORLDS QUARTERLY and PROTOSTARS, an anthology of original stories recently published by Ballantine.

Gather Blue Roses

by PAMELA SARGENT

I CANNOT REMEMBER ever having asked my mother outright about the tattooed numbers. We must have known very early that we should not ask; perhaps my brother Simon or I had said something inadvertently as very small children and had seen the look of sorrow on her face at the statement; perhaps my father had told us never to ask.

Of course, we were always aware of the numbers. There were those times when the weather was particularly warm, and my mother would not button her blouse at the top, and she would lean over us to hug us or pick us up, and we would see them written across her, an inch above her breasts.

(By the time I reached my adolescence, I had heard all the horror stories about the death camps and the ovens; about those who had to remove gold teeth from the bodies; the women used, despite the Reich's edicts, by the soldiers and guards. I then regarded my mother with ambivalence, saying to myself, I would have died first, I would have found some way rather than suffering such dishonor, wondering what had happened to her and what secret sins she had on her conscience, and what she had done to survive. An old man, a doctor, had said to me once, "The best ones of us died, the most honorable, the most sensitive." And I would thank God I had been born in 1949; there was no chance that I was the daughter of a Nazi rape.)

By the time I was four, we had moved to an old frame house in the country, and my

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father had taken a job teaching at a small junior college near by, turning down his offers from Columbia and Chicago, knowing how impossible that would be for mother. We had a lot of elms and oaks and a huge weeping willow that hovered sadly over the house. Our pond would be invaded in the early spring and late fall by a few geese, which would usually keep their distance before flying on. ("You can tell those birds are Jewish," my father would say, "they go to Miami in the winter," and Simon and I would imagine them lying on a beach, coating their feathers with Coppertone and ordering lemonades from the waitresses; we hadn't heard of Collinses yet.)

Even out in the country, there were often those times when we would see my mother packing her clothes in a small suitcase, and she would tell us that she was going away for a while, just a week, just to get away, to find solitude. One time it was to an old camp in the Adirondacks that one of my aunts owned, another time to a cabin that a friend of my father's loaned her, always alone, always to an isolated place. Father would say that it was "nerves", although we wondered, since we were so isolated as it was. Simon and I thought she didn't love us, that mother was somehow using this means to tell us that we were being rejected. I would try very hard to behave; when mother was resting, I would tiptoe and whisper. Simon reacted more violently. He could contain himself for a while; but then, in a desperate attempt at drawing attention to himself, would run through the house, screaming horribly, and hurl himself, head first, at one of the radiators. On one occasion, he threw himself through one of the large living room windows, smashing the glass. Fortunately, he was uninjured, except for cuts and bruises, but after that incident, my father put chicken wire over the windows on the inside of the house. Mother was very shaken by that incident, walking around for a couple of days, her body aching all over, then going away to my aunt's place for three weeks this time. Simon's head must have been strong; he never sustained any damage from the radiators worse than a few bumps and a headache, but the headaches would often keep mother in bed for days.

(I pick up my binoculars to check the forest again from my tower, seeing the small lakes like puddles below, using my glasses to focus on a couple in a small boat near one of the islands, and then turn away from them, not wanting to

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invade their privacy, envying the girl and boy who can so freely, without fear of consequences, exchange and share their feelings, and yet not share them, not at least in the way that would destroy a person such as myself. I do not think anyone will risk climbing my mountain today, as the sky is overcast, cirro-cumulus clouds slowly chasing each other, a large storm cloud in the west. I hope no one will come; the family who picnicked beneath my observation tower yesterday bothered me; one child had a headache and another indigestion, and I lay in my cabin taking aspirins all afternoon and nursing the heaviness in my stomach. I hope no one will come today.)

Mother and father did not send us to school until we were as old as the law would allow. We went to the small public school in town. An old yellow bus would pick us up in front of the house. I was scared the first day and was glad Simon and I were twins so that we could go together. The town had built a new school; it was a small, square brick building, and there were fifteen of us in the first grade. The high school students went to classes in the same building. I was afraid of them and was glad to discover that their classes were all on the second floor; so we rarely saw them during the day, except when they had gym classes outside. Sitting at my desk inside, I would watch them, wincing every time someone got hit with a ball, or got bruised. (Only three months in school, thank God, before my father got permission to tutor me at home, three months was too much of the constant pains, the turmoil of emotions; I am sweating now and my hands shake, when I remember it all.)

The first day was boring to me for the most part; Simon and I had been reading and doing arithmetic at home for as long as I could remember. I played dumb and did as I was told; Simon was aggressive, showing off, knowing it all. The other kids giggled, pointing at me, pointing at Simon, whispering. I felt some of it, but not enough to bother me too much; I was not then as I am now, not that first day.

Recess: kids yelling, running, climbing the jungle gym, swinging and chinning themselves on bars, chasing a basketball. I was with two girls and a piece of chalk on the blacktop; they taught me hopscotch, and I did my best to ignore the bruises and bumps of the other students.

It was at the end of the second week that the incident occurred during recess.

(I need the peace, the retreat

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from easily communicated pain. How strange, I think objectively, that our lives are such that discomfort, pain, sadness and hatred are so easily conveyed and so frequently felt. Love and contentment are only soft veils which do not protect me from bludgeons; and with the strongest loves, one can still sense the more violent undercurrents of fear, hate and jealousy.)

It was at the end of the second week that the incident occurred during recess. I was, again, playing hopscotch, and Simon had come over to look at what we were doing before joining some other boys. Five older kids came over, I guess they were in third or fourth grade, and they began their taunts.

"Greeeenbaum," at Simon and me. We both turned toward them, I balancing on one foot on the hopscotch squares we had drawn, Simon clenching his fists.

"Greeeeenbaum, Esther Greeeeenbaum, Simon Greeeeenbaum," whinnying the green, thundering the baum.

"My father says you're Yids."

"He says you're the Yid's kids." One boy hooted and yelled, "Hey, they're Yid kids." Some giggled, and then they chanted, "Yid kid, Yid kid," as one of them pushed me off my square.

"You leave my sister alone," Simon yelled and went for the boy, fists flying, and knocked him over. The boy sat down suddenly, and I felt pain in my lower back. Another boy ran over and punched Simon. Simon whacked him back, and the boy hit him in the nose, hard. It hurt like hell and I started crying from the pain, holding my nose, pulled away my hand and saw blood. Simon's nose was bleeding, and then the other kids started in, trying to pummel my brother, one guy holding him, another guy punching. "Stop it," I screamed, "stop it," as I curled on the ground, hurting, seeing the teachers run over to pull them apart. Then I fainted, mercifully, and came to in the nurse's office. They kept me there until it was time to go home that day.

Simon was proud of himself, boasting, offering self-congratulations. "Don't tell mother," I said when we got off the bus, "don't, Simon, she'll get upset and go away again, please. Don't make her sad."

(When I was fourteen, during one of the times mother was away, my father got drunk downstairs in the kitchen with Mr. Arnstead, and I could hear them talking, as I hid in my room with my books and records, father speaking softly, Mr. Arnstead bellowing.

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"No one, no one, should ever have to go through what Anna did. We're beasts anyway, all of us, Germans, Americans, what's the difference."

Slamming of a glass on the table and a bellow: "God damn it, Sam, you Jews seem to think you have a monopoly on suffering. What about the guy in Harlem? What about some starving guy in Mexico? You think things are any better for them?"

"It was worse for Anna."

"No, not worse, no worse than the guy in some street in Calcutta. Anna could at least hope she would be liberated, but who's gonna free that guy?"

"No one," softly, "no one is ever freed from Anna's kind of suffering."

I listened, hiding in my room, but Mr. Arnstead left after that; and when I came downstairs, father was just sitting there, staring at his glass; and I felt his sadness softly drape itself around me as I stood there, and then the soft veil of love over the sadness, making it bearable.)

I began to miss school at least twice a week, hurting, unable to speak to mother, wanting to say something to father but not having the words. Mother was away a lot then, and this made me more depressed (I'm doing it, I'm sending her away), the depression endurable only because of the blanket of comfort that I felt resting over the house.

They had been worried, of course, but did not have their worst fears confirmed until Thanksgiving was over and December arrived (snow drifting down from a grey sky, father bringing in wood for the fireplace, mother polishing the menorah, Simon and me counting up our saved allowances, plotting what to buy for them when father drove us to town). I had been absent from school for a week by then, vomiting every morning at the thought that I might have to return. Father was reading and Simon was outside, trying to climb one of our trees. I was in the kitchen, cutting cookies and decorating them while mother rolled the dough, humming, white flour on her apron, looking away and smiling when I sneaked small pieces of dough and put them in my mouth.

And then I fell off my chair onto the floor, holding my leg, moaning, "Mother, it hurts," blood running from my nose. She picked me up, clutching me to her, and put me on the chair, blotted my nose with a tissue. Then we heard Simon yelling outside, and then his banging on the back door. Mother went and pulled him inside, his nose bleeding. "I fella outa the tree,"

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and, as she picked him up, she looked back at me; and I knew that she understood, and felt her fear and her sorrow as she realized that she and I were the same, that I would always feel the knife thrusts of other people's pain, draw their agonies into myself, and, perhaps, be shattered by them.

(Remembering: Father and mother outside, after a summer storm, standing under the willow, father putting his arm around her, brushing her black hair back and kissing her gently on the forehead. Not for me, too much shared anguish with love for me. I am always alone, with my mountain, my forest, my lakes like puddles. The young couple's boat is moored at the island.)

I hear them downstairs.

"Anna, the poor child, what can we do?"

"It is worse for her, Samuel," sighing, the sadness reaching me and becoming a shroud, "it will be worse with her, I think, than it was for me."

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This is a superior story that is set in New York City and yet achieves a fine alien tone. Its author is 32, lives in New York with his wife and 5-year old son. He has sold to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Fantastic* and has had a novel published by Belmont. Mr. O'Neil has also written comic book scripts – including Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman – and recently was given the Academy of Comic Book Arts' Shazam award, the quivalent of SFWA's Nebula.

The Elseones

by DENNIS O'NEIL

YOU'VE SEEN US, WE ELSEones. You've seen us on the edge of crowds at outdoor concerts in Forest Park, sitting in the topmost balcony of Radio City Music Hall at three in the afternoon and in Times Square dives at three in the morning, standing in the rear of cathedrals at Christmas Mass, at parades, at funeral processions, at rallies and sports events. We saunter down Canal Street in the Vieux Carré on spring Sundays, keeping to the curb, skirting the gutter; we haunt the empty pockets of Trafalgar Square. Always, we are on the fringes, alone, observing, never quite participating. Should you speak to us, we answer politely. Should you touch us, you feel skin as lifeless as withered leaves. In our eyes, there is gentleness; in our demeanor, pain is plain as an open sore.

Now, we have abandoned you.

We are not of you.

Though lately I've been trying—trying to be a gourmet, a thief, a lover. Attempts at self-damnation.

I met Elvira—where? I go many places and remember almost none. But—where? At Madison Square Garden? Yes, at the Crusade for the Lord, or whatever it was called—the rally promoted by that evangelist the politicians praise. I don't recall precisely how we came together, two of us in a mob of 20,000; it was, I think after the final exhortation, as the congregation scattered and individuals began draining toward the speaker, white registration cards

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clutched like amulets. Organ music surged, and in one of the troughs between musical waves, I heard this voice close by: ". . .catch *me* going up to that phony, either."

I looked at her. By movie star standards—by Raquel Welch standards—she was more than half attractive. Thick, red-brown hair, unkempt; a proud, well-rounded figure barely discernible beneath a tentish fatigue jacket and faded bell-bottom jeans; teeth too prominent for the narrow face, but used in a genuine smile. She was chattering to me as though I were an old friend: ". . . spotted you as a fellow nonbeliever. I mean, the zoo was closed. This was the only game in town."

And we had joined the crowds on Seventh Avenue, and Elvira was telling me about her art classes at Hunter and her professors and the apartment in the Innwood district she shared with a sociology major at CCNY and a VISTA worker. She steered me to a hot dog counter and ordered franks and sandwiches for us both. She ate noisily, industriously; the moment she swallowed her final mouthful, the chatter resumed. She said, "That was amazing. Do you do it often?"

"What?"

"Rip off the *fascisti*? Beautiful. I mean, was the counterman *afraid* to ask you for money? Is it a bluff?"

"A sort of. . .knack." She was right: I hadn't paid for the food, and neither had she. I hadn't noticed.

"*Amigo*, it is a trick you'll have to teach me." We were at the entrance to the uptown IND lines, and Elvira was digging through her fringed rawhide bag. She produced a pen and a small notebook, scrawled on a page, tore it off and handed it to me. "My name and number," she explained. "I'm generally home around five. Seven on Thursdays—a late seminar." She turned, moved a few steps into the station, turned again to say, "Well, its been fun. I'll be seeing you, I guess."

I went down Seventh Avenue slowly, as I usually do, stopping to view the contents of shop windows, peering through closed burglar gates at suits and shoes and hardware and household appliances, scanning the headlines at newsstands on Fourteenth Street and the posters at the Spanish-language movie theater between Second and Third garishly proclaiming *Santos vs Los Monstros y Las Mujeres Criminales*. In short, I did what I usually do to extinguish the day. But it was different; I felt good. I realized I was feeling good, and I didn't understand

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how I recognized the sensation because it was so alien I shouldn't have been able to name it.

Feeling good still, I entered my tenement building on East Second, just off Avenue A. A kid, a nondescript adolescent, was waiting in the shadows at the end of the corridor, by the staircase. As I brushed past, he whispered something which sounded like, "B'raja."

I ignored him, climbed to the fourth floor and entered my room, my cell. Five paces across the cracked linoleum in any direction brings you to a wall. A daybed. A table. Sink, stove, ancient Frigidaire. In a corner, behind wooden partitions, a toilet and shower.

I lay me down, listening to the music of the tenement, the shouts: *"Tu eres un bastard."* "Shut your mouth, spick bitch."

Then sleep, and another alien experience, a dream.

Warm sand between my forked toes, I squatted on the marge of a crimson sea, a vista of breakers capped with pink foam dwindling to a horizon hidden in ocher mists. And I was saying in a language native to me a word meaning both *serenity* and *soon*, a strange, garbled syllable—chanting it in rhythm with the beat of the waves. . .

I was awake: without being conscious of it, I had been staring at the splash of light on the ceiling from the mercury vapor lamp outside my single window, a bluish rectangle like a phantom television screen. In it, I saw—and *recognized*—a vast, savage wilderness, and I saw and recognized people I'd never met in cities I'd never been to—Atlanta, London, Budapest, Shanghai: people sitting and lying on beds in dank, anonymous chambers. I blinked: the vision vanished.

I got up, crept into the chill, foul-smelling hall, down the stairs. From somewhere on the bottom landing came a crooning of garbled syllables, meaningless yet recognizable, similar to my dream-chant. I hurried out into the predawn morning, an open cage of garbage and sourceless groans, and east, to the FDR Drive overpass, to the strip of grass and the river. I bellied the railing, and heard the hissing wake of an occasional tugboat and the rumble of the F trains on the Williamsburg Bridge, and saw the sprinkling of lights on the Brooklyn shoreline. A sweat-suited jogger trotted by. A dog pissed on a fence. And a husky voice called to me.

I whirled, startled. It was the kid I'd seen in the tenement, standing a few feet away like a shy acolyte.

"You too," he said. "You

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had a dream, didn't you? What was yours?"

"Nothing. I enjoy the morning air."

He continued as though I hadn't spoken. "Mine was a beautiful palace, all tarnished, and the spires were broken. There had been a war. But it was rebuilding. The tarnish was fading and the spires were rising by themselves. It was talking to me, the palace was."

"Say anything interesting?"

He coughed shallowly, hesitating. Suddenly, he asked, "Do you have any idea what B'raja means?"

"You asked me that before, sort of. In the corridor."

"The palace told me your B'raja may be damaged."

I laughed. "I can always take it to the B'raja repair shop."

A long silence. Then: "Is that a joke?"

Honestly puzzled, I replied, "I suppose it is. A feeble one."

"This is no joking matter," he said sadly, backing away, shuffling from me.

A sliver of sun was topping the Brooklyn rooftops. The show had begun; the charade had to be performed. But I had a new scenario—the performance would no longer be a solo. A dialogue, it would be—I hoped. A girl, Elvira, wanted me to call. I strolled to Avenue C, intending to find a telephone. Quite unexpectedly, I had a desire to own a newspaper. I stopped at a candy store, lifted a *Times* from a wire rack, reached into my pocket for money, found none. I wondered: had I *ever* bought a newspaper? Or anything else? I couldn't recall committing the act of purchase.

As an experiment, I said to the clerk, "Pardon me. I gave you a quarter."

"Sorry." He handed me a small, silvery disc, a dime. Yes, definitely a dime. The coin felt huge and heavy, a sewer lid in my palm. Had I ever held a dime before?

I sat in the booth at the rear of the store, consulted the paper from Elvira's notebook, dialed the number on it.

"Hello?" She sounded tinny, and unimaginably distant.

"Hello, it's me, from the rally last night?"

"Oh, the rip-off king. Morning, *amigo.*"

I sought to return the amenity. I said, "How do you

"Okay enough. Considering the shitty state of the nation, and like that. Something on your mind?"

"You mentioned you might like to. . .learn my technique."

"Boy, would I! Does it work on Rolls Royce salesmen?"

"Maybe. Are you free sometime soon?"

"Today? No, I have classes. Tonight, though. Have you ever

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had beef stroganoff? I don't want to brag, but I concoct a beef stroganoff that's pure symphony. I'll trade you—my stroganoff for your rip-off lesson."

"Sounds great."

"Does, doesn't it? —Oh, *damn.* Laney is bringing a bunch of Vistas over tonight. They're gonna change the system by yapping about it. Sure they are. Look, do you have a kitchen?"

"A stove."

"That'll do. Look, let me have your address. I'll cut my Chaucer and try to make it by six. Okay?"

I told her the address of my tenement.

"Got it. Hey, *amigo,* thanks for the invite. Till later, keep well."

I stepped onto the busy street—and noticed things. Sights: cornices shining dully in the sun; glinting chains on garbage cans; dark teenagers sulking warily in doorways; old Ukrainian women huddling in wool shawls despite the heat. And smells: dog feces; sulphur smoke; automobile gasses; fresh cement; and perhaps, faintly, the river. There were tastes, too, and thousands of noises. The world was much with me. Certainly, I'd moved among them before, these sensations, in the. . .*how* many months, years or decades had I lived in the neighborhood? I didn't know. Time beyond yesterday was gray soup. I was bewildered, not troubled, particularly, merely bewildered.

I went five blocks to Thompkins Square Park and found a bench the winos had temporarily abandoned. I opened my newspaper and read of a war, somewhere in a distant quarter of the globe, a recital of armies and machines and dead bodies. Stupidities. Some wars are not fought with machines and explosives in marshes and jungles. No, wars should be waged in the clean clash of intellects, and exile, not death, should be the losers' lot.

Disgusted, I hurled the *Times* into a trash basket.

Next, I crossed Tenth Street to the public library. I perused the larger-than-normal shelves, found a book of color photographs, took it to one of the school desks. The book was titled, *Desert Horizons: The Southwestern United States.* One picture especially caught my attention, an aerial view of a region in California where mountain slopes drop to the very edge of the Pacific. I stared at it, trying to understand what was *wrong* with it, and why it held me so. I failed. Dropped the book on the desk seat and left the library.

Down Avenue B, across Houston, to the movies, the

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Winston Theater. A triple bill, of the usual sort: a western, the Three Stooges, and *Hercules Fights the Swamp Creepers.* (Elseones see a lot of these kinds of films.)

One scene held me as absolutely as the mountain photo had. Hercules is battling. He rebukes a creeper with an ax and the monster pitches into the swamp slime, red goo oozing from the cloven skull, coloring the water. I was thrilled—not by the carnage (a fat woman in the front row yelled, "Hay-*yay*, geev it to the muthafook!"). Rather, the whole ambience of the scene excited me.

During the Stooges comedy, I laughed; I roared until I gasped, at inanities I didn't consider funny. Laughter was demanded; I complied. More bewilderment.

A beaten Ford station wagon was parked by the fireplug near my tenement. A dresser jutted from the tailgate, and boxes full of kitchen utensils jammed the seats. Assorted items of furniture blocked the vestibule. I squeezed between them and mounted the stairs. I had to climb over a banister to avoid a couch wedged between balustrade and wall.

A black man wearing dirty canvas pants and a T-shirt was waiting by my door. I recognized him: he was one of the men I'd seen in the light from the street lamp on the ceiling. He smiled warmly, a greeting.

I asked, "Do I know you?"

He shrugged. "We ain't met. But, yeah, you could say we're acquainted."

"You're moving in?"

"Me and the rest, soon as the regulars move out."

"Which apartment?"

"I ain't decided. Don't make much difference. We won't be here long. A day, two, three at most."

"Who are *we?*"

He scratched his chin reflectively. "That's a good question. Who *are* we?" Again, he shrugged. "We'll learn quick enough. A day, two, three."

"You from New York?"

"I caught me a plane outta Atlanta this morning. Voice in the dream said this's the place we meet. Convections are ideal in New York. Whatever convections are."

A freak, obviously: he and the kid should get along splendidly. "Excuse me," I said. "I have a date."

"A date? You be careful, hear? Mess your B'raja."

"Everyone's concerned about my B'raja. What the hell *is* B'raja?"

"Can't say. Only I got a hunch yours is in sorry shape."

"You worry about yours, I'll tend to mine."

"Mine's tiptop. The nigger

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form is perfect for keeping a B'raja in condition."

I entered my room.

Elvira arrived a while later carrying a supermarket sack stuffed with packages. She thumped it on the table and stood surveying my living quarters, fists on her hips. "*Amigo*, you aren't hot for cleanliness, are you? I'll bet you haven't used soap and water on this pesthole since you signed the lease. Typical bachelor cliché. It bugs me when folks live up to their stereotypes. Well, Miss Elvira signed on as cook, not charlady. I can stand it if you can."

She insisted I help with the cooking. We shuttled between stove, sink and refrigerator, occasionally brushing backs and buttocks, occasionally hovering over the burners with shoulders and thighs touching. She stirred, chopped and chattered, assuring me that politics is shit and art the hope of fulfillment: "I mean, you gotta have something un*changing*, right, *amigo?*"

We ate. The beef mixture tasted, to me, no different from the sandwiches we'd had at the hot dog stand, the red wine no different from the beer. Elvira disagreed. "I do believe Miss Elvira outdid herself for you, *amigo*. Must be the challenge of producing a masterpiece in sordid surroundings."

Dinner done, we piled dishes and pans in the sink, and Elvira sank onto my bed. She patted the mattress. "Sit, *amigo*, and repay my largess with conversation. I'm all ears, desperate for your life story. You're a funny cat. I mean, I'm sitting here beside you and I feel you're off somewhere in the clouds, you're not really present. So tell. Who are you, where do you come from, what do you do—or want to do?"

I wanted to answer. I had a quick vision of the gray soup, my past, and floating in it, my dream—the crimson sea, the ocher mists.

"Look, if its tough on you, forget it. I'm not prying, or anything."

"No, you're not prying. I just can't—" I needed to communicate, desperately. I reached for her shoulders and accidentally palmed a breast. She jerked back.

"Huh-uh, *amigo*. Thanks for the flattery, but no thanks. You don't have to buy the beef with a gentlemanly pass. I mean, you should know the old score. Romance is definitely *not* Elvira's bag. She's had that, Elvira has, a big, ugly dose of it. She's *mucho* tired of men using her for a urinal. I'll cook for you—shit, I'll *mother* you. But no beddy-bounce."

She was desperate for a denial. I sensed a quality of

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strain, of questioning, in her vehemence. Deliberately, I unbuttoned her shirt and gently rubbed the lump of flesh within.

"Bro-*ther!*" she breathed. "I pick you up at the Garden figuring you don't have a sexual bone in your body, and the first chance, you come on like a fraternity type out to prove his masculinity. Surprise, surprise. What's worse, I'm responding—the old bitch-in-heat routine." She pulled away and buttoned her shirt. "Well, you're not gonna get laid tonight. Because I'm not sure I can handle it happening so quickly and because I can't risk having my head garbled. I'm never gonna ask for love, but the sex has to be honest. Be a good guy and let's find me a cab."

We hailed a taxi on Avenue A. As she was getting in, Elvira said, "You can call me tomorrow if you're still interested in my lush body. I'll be home at three."

I slept. Dreamed:

The warm sand, the crimson sea, and barely visible in the shifting ocher mists, magnificent spires, a palace. . .The wind spoke to me, a duet of winds, the voices of the kid and the black speaking in the sigh of the breezes, warning, begging me to preserve my B'raja.

I replied: I am weary. I will take comfort.

They remonstrated: Serenity soon.

My fingers dreamed a memory of Elvira's breast, and the texture of her skin became a scream that stilled the others.

When I awoke, I had a purpose, at last—to please Elvira. She had spoken of her pleasures: she liked legitimate theater, live concerts, art museums. Of these, I knew little. My entertainment had always been movies. (Hadn't it? Always?) Yes, I had a purpose; I would learn of theater, concerts, museums. I would ready myself for Elvira.

A Volkswagen bus pulling an orange trailer was parked by the fireplug. Going, going were the citizens, leaving East Second Street to the freaks.

I boarded the F train at the Houston station and rode uptown. I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art—wandered among paint-smeared canvas, lumps of clay and stone, Elvira's enthusiasms. Then I went to the Children's Zoo—hadn't she mentioned a zoo once?—and realized I'd been there often, and was surprised. As usual, I stayed on the edge of the activity and observed. A cop was chatting with a pushcart vendor. Several matrons were pushing baby carriages. A group of youngsters, high school students probably, were cavorting around a foun-

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tain. A harried, balding man was tugging at a crying child. Gradually, I grew disturbed. I had been at the zoo often and something was missing, some element which should have been there. The vacancy was at the fringes, my territory. None save myself were shunning, staring, cherishing the perimeter. Those familiar, forgettable faces were absent, except for mine; everyone *else* belonged. The brotherhood of the lost had taken a holiday. Abruptly frightened, I scanned the habitats of my breed, borderlines, edges; they were scoured, empty as deserts. Loneliness was may normal state, but not *this* loneliness, this absolute singularity. *Please*, I wanted to pray (to Whom?), *let me see one of my kind.*

I thought of Elvira, and was calmed.

I found myself on Park Avenue South, near one of those glass-aluminum monolithic dwellings. And my adventures as a thief began. I saw a doorman whistling at a taxi, and a plump, fortyish woman swathed in silk struggling to grasp the handle of the front door. Her right arm was loaded with boxes, her left cradled a tiny fuzzy-white poodle. Her purse slipped to the door mat. She bent to retrieve it and a box dropped. Then the poodle bounded free and waddled toward a row of plastic shrubs, yipping. The woman waddled after it, piping, "Fifi, you naughty girl. Come to mamma." In an instant, on impulse, I formed a decision, an Elvira-decision. I scooped up the purse and ran toward Sixth Avenue. Behind me, I heard the woman bray and my legs snapped ahead faster. I plunged into a subway station and, as I had always done, ducked under the turnstile. A yell came from the token booth. I turned, saw a cop slamming open the exit gate, racing onto the platform. A train burst from the tunnel and screeched to a halt. I dashed into an empty car. The train started. Through a grimy window, I could see the cop, raging and helpless.

I was alive with pride and triumph. The rogue, me, who had been just another Elseone an hour earlier, was now a successful criminal. It had been as easy as buying a *Times* without money. I examined my loot; the purse contained keys in a leather holder, miscellaneous ticket stubs, hairpins, lipsticks, and sixty dollars. Elvira would have a grand evening.

We dined at a French restaurant on upper Broadway. Elvira was wearing a dress she described as "senior-prom deluxe," a frilly green creation with a scooped neckline. I

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complimented her on it, and she actually blushed. She made an elaborate ceremony of consulting the menu and ordered for both of us: *pulet en cucote,* chilled *Pouilly Fuisse.* shrimp salad *Deauville,* and for desert, *creme renversee.*

"The French have an absolutely *amazing* cuisine," Elvira said. "Feed me French and I'll love you forever."

We walked to a midtown theater, enjoying a mild, relatively smogless summer night, and were miraculously able to buy orchestra seats for the touring Old Vic's latest *Hamlet;* a last-minute cancellation, the box-office gentleman said. I'd never seen live actors and it was an experience. The set was abstract, a series of platforms fronting looming gauze drapes. At the rear of the stage was a sculpture suggesting a tall, spired castle.

The drama began. Clouds of red vapor billowed from the apron to herald the ghost—

("There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.")

—and the effect was repeated in the final moments, as the courtiers bore the dead prince to his grave—

("Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.")

Elvira was delighted. In the lobby, she said, "The direction was simply brilliant. The bare stage—not a scrap of *any*thing to distract from the poetry. Simply brilliant."

Had the stage been bare?

We waved to a cab.

"B'raja?" said the driver.

"Pardon me?" I said.

"Where to, sir?"

Where *to*—? Rude fingers of minds drummed my consciousness. The enormity of my daring overwhelmed me, and I remember the endless hours of discontent, the aimlessness, extending over years, centuries, tens of centuries. I was a tree in a dense forest, aware but uncaring; men passed and I became less wood, part man; trees fell and I assumed full man-shape, and I watched the clearing of the forest, the planting, the erection of crude cabins, the harvesting, the horses prancing in mud, the babies playing in dust, youth turning to age and being buried by fresh youth, the cabins falling to be replaced by structures of board and stone, those replaced by newer, taller structures of brick, brick also being plugged into the soil and soon torn away, cancers of asphalt consuming the land, the mule-drawn wagons, engines chugging, automobiles, feeble electricity poking holes in darkness, the last of the forest quiet gone, banished by clatter and honk, sky's blue dulling,

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hordes milling, traffic flowing by the taxi—

"Where to, sir?"

I had existed as a presence in wood, yes, and I bided existence as a human with the same passivity; each day isolate, no reason to relate units to past or future, a gray soup of being. Wind; rain; snow; stars; sun; nature; man: separate entities, and identical, and worthless.

"You feeling queasy?" Elvira asked. "Maybe better drive me home."

Elvira was not worthless. "No," I protested. "No, no, no. To the lower east side, East Second Street."

I stroked Elvira's arm. How complete was my transformation? Was I able to seed glorious bastards? It would be a noble destiny, to father a race.

My familiar East Second Street appeared to be a badly done stage set. It was deserted—actors have all gone. Facades of paper; fire escapes of balsa; the few remaining vehicles rough drawings. Fingers wrenched my consciousness, a painful welcome; I commanded them to go.

Gingerly, as though afraid our heels would rip thin fabric, Elvira and I climbed the stairs. Her hand lay on my forearm; her breath fluttered.

"The big moment, hey, *amigo?* I feel exactly like a dopey virgin."

"You're a beautiful dopey virgin."

"I'm a wanton harridan, and you're blind, and I love you for it."

I opened my door, motioned her in.

And that damnable soft voice called to me. The kid and the newcomer, the black, emerged from shadow.

"Go ahead," I said to Elvira. "I'll be along shortly."

"Don't be long. Or I may chicken out."

I faced the kid and the black.

The kid murmured, "They're close, well within this universe."

"Who?" I demanded. "Who's 'they'?"

"The servants," said the kid.

"Coming to carry us," said the black.

I said, " 'Flights of angels' singing us to our rest?"

"Yeah," whispered the black. "You got it."

"No, I haven't."

"He's not in contact," the kid told the black. "It's his B'raja, broken." To me: "Relax. Let them join you."

I felt a soothing tingle—warm sand, crimson sea. . .

"Not me," I shouted. "You tell your servants I'm happy where I am."

"But the war is won," said the kid. "Our exile is over."

"You can't be happy in this

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world," said the black. "It's contrary to us. The whole planet is contrary."

"Suppose," I said, "that your fantasy is true. If it is, we're fools. We've wasted centuries."

"Centuries ain't nothing," said the black.

"If your fantasy is true," I continued loudly, "we have the power to take anything we want. Reach and take."

"That power was given us to ease our stay. Our enemies ain't cruel."

"Each thing we take hurts the B'raja," said the kid.

"Consider my B'raja lost and give me peace, you goddamn freaks."

"We will, brother," said the black as I slammed the door.

I got the last of Elvira's dinner wine from the refrigerator, filled two cups, gave the least cracked to Elvira. "A couple of local nuts," I explained, guiding her to the bed. "They won't bother us."

She perched nervously, hunching, sipping demurely. "Truth is, I feel cheap, having an assignation with someone I've practically just met. Ole debbil puritanism. Darling, you *must* tell me about yourself. Mother and father?"

For no conscious reason, the question annoyed me. "Does it make a difference?"

"Only to my silly conscience."

I started to lie, and couldn't. "Dozens of mothers and fathers. Rich people."

She giggled coyly. "You're the mysterious stranger."

"True, true. I'm a legendary king in exile, I'm a god on leave."

She grinned, displaying ridiculously large teeth. "Come *on*, darling. Stop with the jokes and relate."

Prattle, prattle—display the teeth and prattle. Discuss lumps of stone and smears of paint and recitals of words. My annoyance was huge. I gulped

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wine; the taste was bitter, scorching. I gagged. Resolved to seed glorious bastards. Then I embraced her. Her cup thudded to the linoleum; liquid trickled to the baseboard. Her senior-prom deluxe dress blotted it. Naked, shivering, she whimpered, kissing me awkwardly, and I hugged and caressed the leaden weight of her, and tried to quell my revulsion. Naked, she was human—tawdry, shabby, silly, despicable. Her love was the rattle of marbles in a glass jar. She was one of *them*, essentially stupid, doomed by stupidity. Elvira was filth. I was gripped with the realization that somewhere my true mate existed, the child of a race evolved to grandeur. I was remembering my heritage; I was in contact, however tenuous.

There was a scraping from above: feet on the roof. I shoved Elvira sprawling on the bed, deaf to the agony in her cry, and stumbled to the hall. It was filled with silent, ecstatic figures going up.

They were all waiting—the kid, the black, the exiles I had seen in my vision, all on the roof and adjoining roofs, eyes upraised.

"I'm not too late, am I?" I cried in English.

The procession welled from the building, pushing me steadily to the parapet, to the edge. I clung there, seeing the silhouettes merge to a solid mass.

"I'm coming with you," I pleaded.

The kid answered in our native tongue, pitying me as he refused me.

Silent, waiting, they merged, and I could not force my way into their midst.

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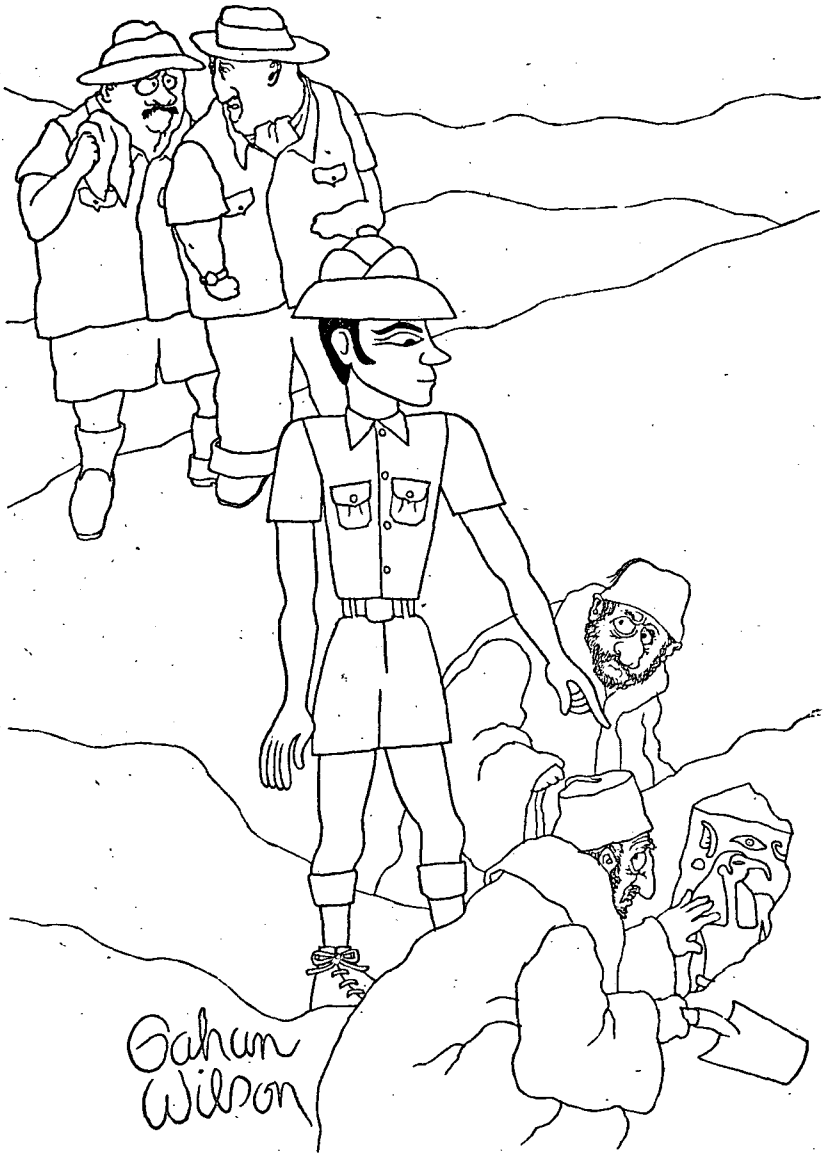

"How do you suppose young Ainsworth's so damned sharp at spotting tombs?"

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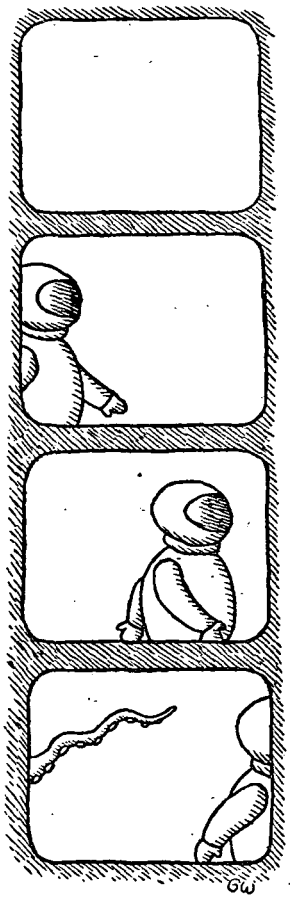
BAIRD SEARLES

FILMS



I MENTIONED LAST month that I was happy to see Peter Watkins' *Privilege* hit the Teevee, since it's a film I admire. I wish I could say the same thing for Peter Watkins' *The Gladiators*, called more aptly in England *The Peace Game*, which opened theatrically recently. He's had the chance to make a fine s-f film and mucked it up; instead we have a shaky allegory.

The thesis: ostensibly to save the costs of war, international disputes are settled in "the peace game," selected teams having at each other in a computer-run building simulating the chances of war. It is managed by Sweden, and the particular game we see is between a team of mixed Westerners and a Chinese Communist team. So far, so good. It could have been a cracking good film. But no, Mr. Watkins has to make it all a mighty allegory. There is an anti-system student who gets into the game. There are generals who sit safely outside the game and give orders. A policeman comes out of nowhere to protect the control room and is shot by the student. A young Westerner and a Chinese captive fall in love and are destroyed because they threaten the system. It is

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obvious that the "game" represents society, but there's so much symbolism going that the verity of the surface breaks down — one never really knows how the game works or how the teams are chosen. So you're never drawn in, and it ceases to work on any level. When it turns out that the whole thing is being commercially televised, sponsored by a spaghetti company, and, as a last straw, that nobody's running the show except the computer, it even ceases to be a good try and is simply a lamentable failure. I was so discouraged that I didn't make the effort to see the other recent Watkins premiere, *Punishment Park*, about a society that gives it dissenters a choice of being imprisoned or of being hunted to death or freedom.

There are Civil War buffs and Revolutionary War buffs, but I'm the only Trojan War buff that I know of, and any of the thousands of spinoffs of that first and most royal of all epic fantasies fascinate me, from the musical *The Golden Apple* to a Wild West adaptation, *The Stars in their Courses*. Obviously, being a fantasy aficionado, it's that aspect of it that I like, and while technically *The Trojan Women* is not a fantasy, as a part of that whole Trojan *thing* I want to touch on it. When I first heard the casting (Hepburn, Redgrave, Bujold, Papas), I thought that obviously Vanessa Redgrave was the only woman in the world to play Helen (or Galadriel, for that matter) after her breathtaking Guenever in *Camelot*, and was stunned to later hear that she was playing Andromache to Irene Papas' Helen. I admire Papas as an actress, but her somewhat masculine peasant good looks didn't seem to be quite the Achaean Helen of whom most of history had dreamed. Well, my apologies. Miss Papas' Helen is the seductive bitch goddess of all time, and she walks off with the movie. Euripides' Helen *is* the cause of it all, and with this lady playing her, one can understand why.

As for the film itself, well, the trouble is that it's not a film. Euripides did not write for the medium (surprise!), nor for modern audiences for that matter, so you're going to have a filmed play or rewrite it totally. For instance, the play is primarily three dialogues, between Hecuba and Cassandra, Andromache and Helen, respectively. This seems a very primitive structure and certainly makes for a minimum of interaction among characters. It's very foreign to any kind of drama the modern audience is used to, but that's the way it is, and that's the way Cacoyannis

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has chosen to produce it. Another point. . .the action is so stylized that to set it against a totally natural setting would ring false. On the other hand, a constructed set would be a problem; they almost always are in film. So Cacoyannis set it in a real, but old, ruin (in Spain, I believe); it's obviously not just-fallen Troy, but gives the right atmosphere of desolation that the text needs. The film, for me, reached the mythic, epic quality I wanted at the end, as the women, led by Hecuba, stumble away from the blazing city to slavery. Aside from that and Miss Papas, it's really just a good Classical Experience.

Late, late show department . . .Continuing our Trojan kick, I saw *Helen of Troy* (1956), which is as Hollywood romantic as the other is Greek tragic (Helen elopes only because she is helping Paris escape Sparta and her life is threatened by Menelaus' nasty soldiers when they're discovered); nevertheless, it's one of my favorite movie-movies, and the fantasy elements they chose to keep in are most interesting. The gods may or may not be moving things, but Cassandra *is* prescient, and Achilles dies of a wound in the heel. Above all, the film is visually splendid; the Greek and Trojan warriors look just like you want them to, Jacques Sernas and Rossanna Podesta are superhumanly beautiful as Paris and Helen, and one scene is particularly brilliant. The horse is dragged into the city by the rejoicing populace; it moves gigantically through the walls and along the streets, lit by the flickering torches below. A rather decorous bacchanal is held around it in the central square; gradually the celebrants fade away until there is only one girl drunkenly playing a flute on the horse's base. A boy lifts her onto his shoulders and they weave away into the darkness. The sound of the single flute fades; there is a moment of silence as the horse broods over the doomed city, then a slight sound. . .from inside the horse. Now *that's* movie making.

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In "Bruno," (April 1970) Dean Koontz introduced Jake Ash, a hard-boiled detective with the ability to act as a doorway between different worlds. In this fast and funny follow-up story. Jake assists the probability police in tracking down two enormous and sexy heads of cabbage.

Cosmic Sin

by DEAN R. KOONTZ

I WAS IN MY CUBBYHOLE bathroom shaving off my 5:00 shadow, even though it was only 4:00. In ten minutes, I would wave Myrna. She would shower, powder and perfume that pretty body of hers, and we'd be ready for a steak dinner at the Ace Spot by 6:00. Anyway, that's what I had planned. I'm a pretty good private detective, but a lousy goddamned fortune teller. As I was wiping away the last trace of foam with a new razor blade, the Probability Police agent phased into existence on my right. The air shimmered, seemed to *bend*, and there he was—a tall dude with a lot of black hair and the quiet features of a university professor. No matter what he looked like, however, he was trouble, an obstacle between me and that steak.

Across the infinity of possible Earths, there are men and women whose body chemistry makes it possible for them to function as doorways between the probability lines. No more than half a dozen of us exist on any single worldline, so we're kept fairly busy. Even on a backwater probability like our Earth, where few worldline travelers wish to go.

My ability had only evolved a year earlier, but I was by now quite accustomed to three or four visitors a month. Indeed, by playing my hand right, I had been able to work a few of these dudes for some money. Even people from other worlds find use for a private richard. As I finished the last stroke with my razor, I sized up *this* copper. Somehow, I sensed that beautiful aroma of money again.

I rinsed my face and said, "Let's see your badge."

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He rolled his eyes, looked shocked and spoke with a cultured tone that wasn't phony. "How did you know I was the police?"

"I can smell 'em," I said.

I took his badge, drew a finger over it, and watched the printing turn into a photograph. His name was Howard Plimpton, and he matched his credentials. I gave back the badge.

"You can—smell us?" he asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Indubitably."

"What do we—what do police smell like?"

"Trouble," I said. I was feeling good, the vision of crisp green bills lingering behind my eyes. "I think I can help you," I said.

He shook his head again, perplexed. "I don't know how you knew that I need help, but I do. I looked in the directory and discovered that this portal, that you, are a private investigator. I jaunted us here."

"Us?"

"Behind you," he said.

I'm hard to sneak up on. If I weren't, I'd be dead—oh, murdered six or seven years ago anyway. I can even sense the beginnings of a cross-world visitor's arrival, and I'm told that's unusual. Most "portals" don't know anyone is jaunting through until they see them in the flesh. Yet, two nasty-looking characters had managed to appear in the crowded bathroom, directly behind me, without my noticing them.

Fortunately, their purpose did not seem villainous.

They looked like two enormous heads of cabbage, each somewhere near four foot in diameter, though one was slightly larger than the other. They were leafy and gray, with eyes, nose and maw half hidden in greener clumps of leaves. The larger of the two hung from my shower rail by two ropy tentacles while its other two appendages waved quietly at me, like seaweed stirred along the floor of the ocean. Creepy. You know? The smaller one stood on the closed lid of my toilet, its four tentacles bunched and stiffened beneath it, like legs. Both of them watched me with the prettiest blue eyes I'd ever seen and made—as I listened more closely—very soft, gentle mewing noises, like kittens.

They didn't seem to want to eat me, strangle me, or suck my blood. If anything, they appeared to want to be cuddled and petted.

Just the same, I kept my eye on them.

"Who are your friends?" I asked Plimpton.

"Call them Joe and Sam. They haven't names like ours." He was looking at Sam and Joe

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so fondly that I wondered for a moment if he were in control of all his faculties.

"Which is Sam?" I asked.

"Oh, the big one is Sam!" Plimpton said.

I said hello to Sam and Joe, respectfully.

They didn't say anything. But they did blink their big blue eyes at me for a while. They had gorgeous black lashes.

"What's the bit?" I asked Plimpton.

"What? Oh, you mean—what's the situation?"

"About that."

"We've come here to rescue Bill and Jim," he said. Immediately, Sam and Joe began twittering in higher, louder voices, though they still didn't make sense. "Sam and Joe and Bill and Jim constitute a quadra-sexed gestalt."

I looked back at Sam and Joe who were batting blue eyes at me and making like puppy dogs. "Perverts, eh?" I asked.

Plimpton gasped. Sam and Joe shivered and sounded as if they were retching. "Of course not!" Plimpton said.

"Look," I said, "if four guys get together for fun and games, that is not a normal sort of—"

"You do not understand," Plimpton said, laying on the college professor superiority. He wrinkled his nose and drew away from me a bit.

Suddenly, I wanted to punch his teeth down his throat so he'd have to chew with his stomach from now on. I restrained myself, smelling money even stronger than before.

"These two milnians and their two breedmates do not have a human bisexual physique. It takes four separate milnian sexes, working together, to produce children. Actually, there is only one male in four, one female, and two—well, we haven't words for what the other two are. I merely dubbed them Sam, Joe, Bill and Jim for the convenience of communication."

"Then at least one of them is a Mable or Bertha?" I asked.

"That's true," Plimpton said.

"Go ahead, then." I felt better—though not much.

"Three days ago," Plimpton explained, "Bill and Jim ran off with a sharpie promoter named Lester Coldwood, a rather unpleasant man who earns a living peddling pornographic senso-films on worldlines where that form of entertainment has sprung up. You see, Mr. Ash, it is possible for two sexes of the milnian race to make love. Children cannot be conceived that way, and most milnians look upon sex outside the gestalt as the most despicable of sins. Their religion calls for seven years of meditation and fasting to erase the mark on the

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soul that such a transgression would engender."

"Seven years is a long time to be repentant."

"Ah, but they live around six hundred years," Plimpton said, smiling. "As you've guessed, the milnians are an alien race that has made contact with Earth on a number of probability lines. Anyway, Lester Coldwood intends to produce senso-films of Bill and Jim engaged in acts of milnian sacrilege. He'll make a fortune peddling them."

I looked at Sam and Joe. "To *who?*"

"To whom," Plimpton said. "To other milnians."

"Isn't it a sin to look at such films—as far as they're concerned?"

"A minor sin. To look is a minor sin, while to actually engage firsthand is major."

"Oh, I said, "they have the same hypocritical codes we do."

"Please!" Plimpton said. He was anxious that I not offend the damn cabbages.

"What could Coldwood have promised the other two to get them to run off and make his films?"

"Wealth in milnian currency," Plimpton explained. "You see, the milnian religion permits a sinner to buy away his years of repentance. Dispensations, so to speak. Bill and Jim planned to buy off their fasting and meditation and still have enough money to enrich their breedgroup with a better home-pit and other luxuries."

I smiled. "But Sam and Joe here don't think Coldwood will pay."

"And neither do I," Plimpton said. "He'll use these defenseless little creatures and leave them stranded somewhere. He'll cut out on them and make his fortune on the senso-films."

"And you want me to find him."

"Correct."

"How do you know he's on *this* worldline?"

"He had to stop somewhere to make the films. Yet we kept close on his tail until yesterday afternoon when he managed to lose us in a clever pattern of jaunt routes. We thought he'd won. Then, just three hours ago, headquarters reported that another of our agents, Policeman Halderbaum, disappeared after jaunting into this worldline while on a routine mission."

"You think Coldwood has him?"

"Yes," Plimpton said. "Halderbaum used a 'portal', a man like yourself, named Harrison Tubb. We think Coldwood is using Tubb's home to make the films while holding Tubb prisoner. When Halderbaum

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accidentally jaunted into them, Coldwood overpowered him and imprisoned him as well. We want to make an indirect approach on Tubb's home to catch Coldwood unawares before he finishes his films and absconds."

"Why don't you go after Coldwood yourself?" I asked.

"And leave these two behind?"

"They'd be safe here."

"They'd be *terrified!* I couldn't leave them with a total stranger."

Sam and Joe murmured as if in agreement.

I was about to mention the terms of my employment when there was a knock at the bathroom door. A moment later, before I could warn her, Myrna opened the door and peeped in, grinning. She was about to make some crack about catching me in the buff—then saw Sam and Joe.

They twittered at her.

She screamed and fainted. She fell backwards, still holding the door handle, pulling the door shut as she went.

I winced when I heard her strike the floor of the hallway. She bounced. Twice.

"Magnificent woman," Plimpton said as we tucked Myrna into bed. "Such proportions!"

"Yeah," I said, leading him into the living room again. "Are you sure that pill you gave her will keep her knocked out?"

"Eight hours. I assure you."

We sat on the couch. The cabbages slithered up to us, slapping tentacles around and burbling. "Money," I said. "I'll need a good bit of it." I handed him four fifties and five twenties.

"Have these ever been duplicated before?" he asked.

"Do you take me for an amateur?"

"I guess not," he said. He stretched the bills in a line across the coffee table. He took a small collapsible camera-like device from his pocket. In five minutes, he had used that machine to make copies of each of the bills. And then again.

"Once more," I said.

"That's too much duplication from the same bills."

"It isn't counterfeit," I reminded him. "It's good money, real as any. Even if the serial numbers are the same, it won't matter. I spend it judiciously."

Reluctantly, he did as I asked until he had made twelve hundred in reproduced currency. I scooped up the bills and put most of them in the safe in the kitchen. Four hundred went in my wallet.

I had taken time to dress while he had given Myrna the sedative. All I had to do now

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was strap on my shoulder holster, load the Colt .38 I carry, slip it into the leather. I picked a raincoat out of the closet by the front door, dropped a dozen bullets in the right-hand pocket, draped the coat over my arm.

"I'll be at Harrison Tubb's place in two or three hours," I said.

"Please hurry, Mr. Ash. Remember this: you are not merely going to apprehend a criminal—but you are pledged to save Bill and Jim and Sam and Joe from mortal sin."

"Yeah," I said. "Sure," I said. I got the hell out of there. That damn Plimpton gave me the creeps worse than the cabbages did.

Sky Pilot decided to fly the last five miles upside down, and we spent the time watching the Appalachians go by above us. The blood rushed to my head until my eyes felt like they were hanging down on my cheeks. I had a fierce headache, and I felt like tossing up the lunch I hadn't eaten.

Sky Pilot was singing and commenting on the eternal beauty of nature. Sky Pilot is not his real name, but he won't tell anyone his real name.

Some of his customers say he's wanted for murder somewhere. But the majority of us—when we get together to drink to our good fortune in continuing to escape death at his hands—think he's nothing more than a harmless mental patient escaped from some state institution.

He is long haired, bushy bearded, freaked out, a dude who somehow got ownership of a four-seater, twin-engine airplane of recent vintage. Two years ago, he opened a charter flight company, SKY PILOT'S TRIP SERVICE, and has been busy ever since. All Sky Pilot cares about is keeping food in his stomach, walls around his bed, and a stash of grass handy. Since his wants are simple, his rates are cheap. You'd be surprised how many of us there are who will risk death in the care of a hopped-up madman of a pilot, just to save a few bucks.

He righted us as the dusty airstrip came into view. We were thirty-eight miles southeast of Pittsburgh, away from the luxuries of macadamed fields. Besides the miserable landing deck, there was a corrugated iron building down there, a shaky wooden control tower long out of use, and a parking lot containing three cars and a Volkswagen bus. Sky Pilot spoke a few words into the mike, punctuating his landing request with "yeahs" and "mans" and "cools" and "right ons" until I thought I would scream.

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We hit dirt, bounced, did a turn at field's end, and came back to the corrugated building that served as a hangar and office complex.

"Now, man, let me scan this properly," Sky said when we stopped. "I'm to wait here for you and maybe do some ferrying in the area too."

"Right on," I said.

"Like, a deposit would be nice. You dig?"

"I dig," I said. I gave him a deposit in reproduced bills, got out of the plane and went inside the iron hangar. While he paid the small landing fee, I approached a bucktoothed, skinny girl who was pecking at a typewriter which was dwarfed by a mammoth old desk.

"Can I rent a car here?" I asked her.

She looked up, blinked at me like a horse waiting for a sugar cube. "Rent?" she asked.

"Yeah, like Hertz or Avis?"

"Bonnerton's too small a town for them," she said. "You'll have to go closer to Pittsburgh. Like Greencastle maybe."

"I can't walk it," I pointed out.

She blinked. "Naturally. A bus will take you to Greencastle. Stops here in—four hours."

By that time Coldwood would be gone with his dirty movies under his arm. "Look," I said, "do you have a car, your own car?" She was such a hick, so defeated in manner and appearance, that I figured I could burn her for about half what a Hertz rental would cost me.

Ten minutes later, after I had paid her three times what a Hertz rental would have cost me and finished erasing the stereotype of the country girl from my memory stores, I left the airfield parking lot in a battered, asthmatic 1957 Ford whose springs were made of cardboard and whose tires were as bald as Myrna's rump. Now I knew what it felt like to drive a tank in World War II.

The only difference was that soldiers were not required to pay for the privilege of driving a goddamned tank.

Bonnerton was one of those towns peculiar to rural Pennsylvania, built along the main highway with no parallel back streets and with all of the few branching side streets terminating in open fields. The houses were all white frame, two stories with elevated front porches, swings on the porches, hedges along the steps. Usually, one or two people sat in the swings, behind the hedges, on the porches, watching the traffic go by to pass the time.

It was the sort of town in which even a sloth could go crazy for something to do.

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When turtles crossed the highway, they made it from berm to berm faster than the citizens.

At Heather Down River Grocery, a combination food store and gas station whose name perplexed me, I got directions to Harrison Tubb's place, which was a mile and a quarter south along a potholed country lane. The holes, in fact, were nearly large enough to swallow the Ford, which might have been a blessing.

I passed the house. It was as the grocery store clerk had described it: large, stone, with many shrubs and a willow tree or three, set on a hill above the road. Harrison Tubb had money; that much was evident. Plimpton had not told me what Tubb did for a living when he provided the address; I wished I had asked.

I parked around the next bend and walked back to the edge of Tubb's property, hidden from the house by a line of poison-berry brambles. I left the road and followed those bushes up the hill, closer to the house.

Nothing looked suspicious. A late-model Thunderbird was parked in the open garage, twenty feet from the house. A few ears of dried corn hung on the front door knocker, a decoration of autumn common to this part of the country. Dried leaves skittered crisply across the stone walk. Nearby, a winter bird sang. The scene was idyllic, dappled with golden sunlight that filtered through the sheltering trees.

Still, I felt that, if I stood up and boldly approached the front door, I'd get my head blown off.

I circled the house and came up from the rear, dashing from one flower bed to another, pretending I was a wilted violet. At last, I pressed my back against the warm fieldstone wall next to the kitchen door.

Carefully, I looked around the frame, through the window. At the kitchen table, firmly lashed to a heavy pine captain's chair, sat a man in a dark-blue suit, blue shirt, blue tie. He was powerfully built, obviously angry—and smelled of cop. There was little doubt that this was Halderbaum, the Probability Policeman who stumbled across Coldwood by mistake.

The door was locked. I tapped a fingernail against the glass, trying to draw his attention. He looked all over the room for the source of the noise before it finally dawned on him there was someone at the door. He turned, wide-eyed, and shouted something through the dishrag Coldwood had stuffed and bound into his mouth.

I motioned for him to stay quiet.

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He settled down and watched me pick the lock with a wax-covered wire probe I took from my pocket. Two minutes later, I entered Harrison Tubb's house and closed his door behind me.

I untied him and pulled the tape away from his mouth. When he spat out the wadded dishrag, I asked, "You Halderbaum?"

"Damn straight," he said. He was whispering, and his voice was strangely high pitched. "I'm going to tear out his eyes and use them in a marble game. I'm going to stretch his tongue and step on it, and then I'm going to break his teeth out of his gums, one at a time. I'm going to—"

"Okay, okay," I said. "You can do whatever you want to him, so long as I get the films and the milnians."

"Can I hold his nose and mouth shut until he turns green?" He was rubbing at his wrist where the rope had bound him.

"Even that," I said. "Where is he?"

Halderbaum almost told me, then looked me over. "Who are you?"

I told him, but he didn't like it.

"I only trust organization men," he said.

I said, "Look, I'll even let you stretch his ear lobes until he can stand on them, and you can force his foot into his rectum and hold it there until it grows fast."

"Really?" His face, plastic handsome, brightened at the thought.

"Promise," I said.

"He's upstairs now, setting up the stage for one of his films."

"The cabbages?"

Halderbaum said, "They're with him." He stood up and swung his arms, bringing back his circulation. "So's Harrison Tubb. Coldwood won't let Tubb out of his sight, for fear someone else will jaunt into Tubb's reception radius."

"Is he armed?"

"That's the worst part." Halderbaum looked glum. He was thinking what a loss it would be if he couldn't play marbles with Coldwood's eyes.

"Oh?"

"He has a distorter, handgun size. I don't know how much charge its pack has left, but probably enough to stop us."

I didn't like the sound of the weapon. "What does it distort?"

"Time," Halderbaum said. "When the beam hits you, it sets up an unnatural resonance between your body and the time stream. It creates a temporary pocket in the flow of events."

"What does that mean?"

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"It breaks your relationship with real time. It slows you down to a fifth your normal speed, makes you feel like you're walking through syrup."

"But the effect is only temporary?"

"A few minutes is all he needs to escape."

"What do you suggest?" I asked him.

"We break his jaw so far that it hangs down on his chest, and then we play tiddlywinks using his mouth for the cup. And maybe we could—"

"Never mind," I said. I drew my Colt .38. "Stay behind me, try to give me support if you can."

We tiptoed into the living room, to the foot of the stairs, then went quietly upwards. Halderbaum was so close behind me that I could feel his hot breath on my neck, as if he were inspecting me for fleas.

When we reached the second floor, we could hear the clatter of a senso-film camera from the back room at the end of the corridor. We went after it, Halderbaum still searching for my fleas.

I got a look at Lester Colwood through the open door. He was working a large, silvery camera-like device, pointing it into a part of the room I couldn't see. He looked so much the part of the pornography magnate that I was disconcerted. He was short, chubby and greasy. His black hair was slicked down. He wore a trimmed mustache and smoked a cigar. He was dressed in a cheap blue suit and white turtleneck velour. Everything about him was seedy. He bespoke degeneracy. I was disconcerted because, in our own world, some of my best friends are pornography pushers, and none of them look the least bit degenerate. Perhaps Coldwood's appearance could be attributed to the cosmic scope of his criminal activity, his multiworld market. When a man was big time, he usually felt it necessary to uphold the image people expected of him.

I sidled through the doorway while Coldwood's attention was on the rollicking milnians. To my left, tentacles flapped and strange noises rose up like birds, but I did not look that way. I concentrated on Coldwood. I was almost halfway to him when Halderbaum, behind me, lost control and began to shriek at the pornographer, threatening dire tortures.

Coldwood whirled, grabbed for his pocket, came up with a silly-looking gun, much like a tomato soup can with a handle and trigger.

I fired the Colt to dissuade him, but he was pluckier than I thought. He didn't even juke at the sound of the weapon, but

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fired the distorter, getting me first, then Halderbaum.

It. . .all. . .slowed. . .down . . .

My leg took seven hundred years to rise up and be put down, and each step was more like a mile than a yard. I heard myself yelling at Coldwood, but the words came out like a 78 rpm phonograph record played at 33 1/3.

Halderbaum, who had come up beside me, was moving through water, his arms flailing like lazy, lead banners. He had tripped and was falling, but he tumbled in the air like a piece of fluff, requiring an eternity to strike the floor.

Then, abruptly, the charge wore off, and I stumbled forward towards Coldwood who had backed against the far wall and was picking up a length of wood he intended to use as a club. It looked like a chair leg. I supposed he had used it on Harrison Tubb and on Halderbaum the first time he overpowered him.

Beside me, Halderbaum came out of the distortion pocket and slammed into the floor like an elephant dropped from an apartment house roof.

Coldwood saw that he couldn't use the club yet and fired his weapon.

Again. . .it. . .all. . .slowed . . .down. . .

Coldwood finished hefting the club while I did a casual minuet in his direction, fluttering my hands at him like ribbons floating above a girl's head in a light breeze.

He grinned at me. A very seedy grin. Yellow teeth, heavy lips, a black throat beyond.

I had sized up the situation in a hurry and knew what my only chance was. When the charge wore off and I was less than ten feet from Coldwood, I braced myself against the speed change and continued forward in slow motion, tailoring my every movement so that he would think I was still affected. When I was only three feet away, he swung the club. I shifted into high gear, surprised him, tore the thing from his hand, and drove the barrel of the Colt hard into his flabby gut.

"Oof," he said, and he sat down on the floor.

Halderbaum came over and said, "Do we start with his ear lobes or his eyeballs?"

"Neither," I said. "I ask him a few questions. *Then* you can have him." That seemed to satisfy the operative. I turned to Coldwood and said, "How much film have you shot?"

"None of your business," he said.

Across the room, the milnians were holding each other, staring at me fearfully.

"I won't ask again," I said.

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He still wouldn't tell me. I kicked him in the stomach, about the same place the Colt had jabbed him and stepped back while he bent over and sucked the dust off the floor between his legs.

"Now?" I asked when he was upright again.

"You were too damned fast," he whined. "I just started the first feature. We was only going through some foreplay."

"Foreplay?" I asked, looking at Bill and Jim.

"They ain't so much different than us," Coldwood said. "They need some tenderness first, play around a little to get them hot."

I said to Halderbaum, "He's yours." Then I went to the camera and took the film out and shoved it in my pocket.

The cabbages began moaning.

I told them to shut up or I'd make stew out of them. Obviously, they understood English, even if they did not speak it. They tried to look unappetizing and cowered in the corner.

The time was 7:30. It would be dark by ten after eight and heavy dusk as much as ten minutes before that. I grabbed the phone, called the Bonnerton airport, got Sky Pilot in surprisingly short order, and told him what roads I had followed coming out. I described the house and told him he had to be landed in the field behind it before dark. I hung up and leaned against the wall and caught my breath.

Halderbaum was bent over Lester Coldwood, who still hadn't managed to get up. He was saying, "You know what else I'm going to do to you for spoiling my service record? I'm going to use the distorter on you and, while you're in slow time, I'm going to dance all around you and beat you silly with that chair leg. Then I'm going to—"

"Halderbaum," I said wearily. "He's yours. I'll tell Plimpton that you're taking him in. I have to get these cabbages into the field back of the house and effect a reunion between them and their breedmates."

Halderbaum didn't really hear me. He said, "Yeah." Then he turned to Coldwood and said, "I'm going to hang you by your hair—"

Beside me, something banged against the inside of a closet door. I opened the door and let Harrison Tubb fall out. He struck his head when he did, and I didn't even get to ask him what he did for a living.

The cabbages were reluctant to follow me, but another threat of the stewpot variety made them shape up. They bumped down the stairs, using

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their tentacles to hold onto the railing, slithered across the carpeting in the living room, rumbled along the polished hardwood corridor floor, into and out of the kitchen. In the grass, as they followed me across the lawn in the open field, they hardly made any noise at all.

I sat down at the edge of the cleared land and ordered them to do the same. Instead, they each stood on four tentacles, poised and tense.

I needed a good, big belt of Scotch.

And a tumble in bed with Myrna.

At 8:00, as the heavens swiftly darkened, Sky arrived and performed a rugged landing on the unmown, rutted field, turned the plane toward me, and taxied so close that I thought I'd be chopped up by the propellers. I wasn't.

I lead the cabbages to the passenger's door which Sky opened for us, helped them into the two rear seats. I couldn't see how to get the safety belts around them, so I warned them to hold tight with their tentacles. They blinked blue eyes at me and mewed pitifully. I sympathized; it was the first time they had ridden with Sky Pilot.

When I was strapped down next to Sky, I said, "Let's go!"

Two minutes later, we were airborne, though we narrowly avoided tearing out the plane's belly on the upper branches of a stand of birch trees.

"Where to?" Sky asked.

"Back to the airfield," I said. "I'll have to tell the girl at the desk where I left her car."

He banked north.

I said, "Well?"

"Well what?" Sky asked, chewing on a stick of Juicy Fruit which gave the cockpit a mouth-watering aroma.

"You don't wonder about our passengers?"

"What's there to wonder about?"

I turned around to look at Bill and Jim. They were still large cabbages with tentacles and blue eyes. "You get a lot of passengers like those two?" I asked.

"Look," Sky said, "let me explain my position."

"Explain away."

"I'm twenty-nine years old, but I been around. My IQ measures 165, well within the genius range. I am not bragging, just stating a fact so you can better see my position in this." He looked at me to see if I thought he was bragging, seemed satisfied and continued. "When I was twelve years old, I began to wonder what the hell life was all about—considerably before most people begin to wonder."

"I haven't even begun

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myself," I said. "I keep putting it off."

He didn't seem to have heard me. "So for seventeen years, I have been reading and theorizing, stretching my perceptions, trying to find out the Meaning of Life. You know? Dig?" He had realized that he hadn't thrown in any bits of slang, and it disconcerted him for a moment. "Two years ago, I decided I had looked at everything, traveled all over the world, read a bit of all sorts of stuff from biophysics to nursery rhymes. And nothing was any clearer. Which meant, if I was to stay sane, that life had no purpose, no purpose at all. I could do what I pleased."

He waited to see if it had gotten through to me. "Go on."

He said, "Now, if something comes along which I never saw before and never considered before, something so big that I have to start re-evaluating everything, I have to start all over again. My peace of mind would be ruined. My defense is to ignore it, you see. Can you dig it?"

"You're handling the question of the Meaning of Life in somewhat the way I always have, by ignoring it."

"Exactly. So, I haven't seen anything unusual. Your friends dress a little weird, maybe, but otherwise they seem like good joes."

The cabbages whimpered, slapped their tentacles against the arms of their seats, and touched each other for reassurance.

We landed at the Bonnerton field after dark. The buck-toothed shyster masquerading as a country girl was sitting at the reception desk, as if she spent twenty-four hours a day there. I told her about the car, was forced to give her another twenty bucks for the inconvenience, and left her a rich woman.

When I got back to the plane, Sky Pilot was sitting in his seat, staring frontward but talking to Bill and Jim, who sat behind him. "What do you think of Nixon's foreign policy?" he asked them. When they didn't answer, he said, "That Raquel Welch is sure some dish, eh? You see her in *Myra Breckenridge?*" The cabbages tittered. "You prefer the Dallas Cowboys or the Jets? Too bad about Namath's knees."

I slid into my seat, and he stopped talking. He flashed me a grateful look for getting back so quick, and he got us out of Bonnerton so fast that I was mashed against the seat.

Two hours and ten minutes later, we taxied close to the half hangar he rented and transferred the cabbages into the back seat of my Thunderbird.

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Though the rear of the car is roomy, they just about filled it up, what with eight tentacles that couldn't seem to stay still. I paid Sky, got in the front seat, and drove home.

"Thank God you made it!" Plimpton said when I walked in the door. He looked behind me, switched his mask of relief for one of concern. "Bill and Jim?" he asked.

"In the back seat of my car," I said. I filled him in on the rest of it.

"Well, you've done a fine job, just fine."

"It isn't over," I pointed out. "You'll want to find a transmission 'portal,' and you won't be able to herd these four cabbages on your own."

It is a quirk of crossworld jaunt physics that the organism which acts as a receiver cannot also act as a transmitter, and vice versa. I was a receiving "portal" for probability travel but could not transmit anyone. For that, Plimpton would have to travel across town to the home of a man named Cordes, who was the only transmitter in a thousand miles.

"Damn, yes," Plimpton said. "Do you think we can all fit in your automobile?"

"It'll be tight," I said.

It was.

Sam, Joe and Bill were barely able to squeeze into the back seat, and they chittered like fingernails tapped on glass to indicate their discomfort. Plimpton and I sat up front, with Jim between us. I was squashed up against the door, and I could hardly find enough elbow room to drive.

When the probability travelers had first crossed into our Earth, little more than a year ago, Cordes had lived in a medium-income apartment like mine. Now, he owned a three-story Tudor house in an exclusive suburb. Though a receiving "portal," like me, couldn't very well charge the jaunters for the use of the field I radiated—a transmitter, like Cordes, could. It seemed that just everyone was anxious to leave our Earth after a short stay and was willing to pay for it rather than waste time in arguments. Cordes kept himself handy or left messages where he could be found and was paid for his cooperation. As always, I got the short end of the stick; I had to *work* an angle to make money out of the thing.

At 11:06, we curbed beneath the elms in front of the house. There were no lights. Plimpton said, "The 'portal' doesn't seem to be home."

"Home or not, we're unloading the cabbages here. Did you notice the expressions on some of the drivers who passed us and looked in? We're just lucky one of them wasn't a cop."

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"But if the 'portal' isn't home—"

"I'll break in. I'm an expert at that." I opened the door. "Wait here until I call for you."

"Where would we go?" he asked.

"I guess so," I said. I went up to the front door and beat it with my fist. That made me feel better, even though no one answered.

With a handkerchief wrapped around my fist, I smashed in the small window in the center of the oaken slab and tried to reach the lock. When I had torn my coatsleeve on a glass shard and figured on catching an important artery next, I gave that up. I looked at the windows, chose the one on the left, and was preparing to break it in when I heard someone running across the lawn, breathing heavily.

I turned around and faced a cop. "Don't you move," he said.

Down at the street, a police car was angled in front of my T-Bird. Another cop was getting out of it.

"An alarm?" I asked.

"Connected to the station house switchboard," the blue-boy said. He had gotten most of his wind back, and he was grinning now.

The second cop was leaning in the window of my car. He suddenly stood erect, whirled, and ran towards us. "Sergeant Hayes! Sergeant Hayes!"

Sergeant Hayes was a good man; he did not look away from me for a moment, but waited until the younger cop was beside him. "What is it?"

"You got to see what's in the car," the younger one said. His face was a ghastly white-blue-green. His eyes were bulging like plums.

"Can't you tell me, Frank?"

"Lettuce," Frank said.

"Lettuce?" Hayes asked.

"Four goddamned big heads of lettuce. I mean *big* heads of lettuce!"

Sergeant Hayes looked confused. The pistol he carried, which had been pointed at my gut, wavered and dipped toward the lawn. "Lettuce thieves?" he asked himself. It was something new to his experience.

"No, no!" Frank said. "There's more to it than that. These heads of lettuce—they got tentacles. And eyes. And they were talking to me, but I couldn't understand them."

Sergeant Hayes did not respond to that. He looked at the boy, long and hard. Then he looked at me. I shook my head and looked sadly at young Frank, as if I thought it a shame that such a boy should go round the bend. Life is full of tragedies.

"Sergeant Hayes, if you'll come look—" Frank began.

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"We'll come look," Hayes said.

We all went down and looked into my Thunderbird. Plimpton and the cabbages were gone.

"I swear—" Frank began.

Hayes said to me, "Don't try to run, or I'll kill you." Then he went to the squad car and came back with a breathalator. He gave it to Frank and said, "Blow up the pretty balloon."

"You think I'm drunk? You think I didn't see—"

"BLOW UP THE BALLOON!" Hayes roared.

Frank blew it up. At least the activity brought some color back to his face.

A few minutes later, Sergeant Hayes and I put our heads together over the results of the test. Young Frank stood half a dozen paces away, looking guilty and frightened. The test, though he didn't know it, showed he was sober. I suspect he was beginning to think he was drunk, even though he hadn't been drinking.

"Maybe your machine's not working right," I said.

"Too simple to fail," Hayes said.

At that moment, Cordes drove up, entered the drive, and stopped. He rolled down his window and said, "Anything wrong here?"

"Burglar," Hayes said. "Caught him smashing in a window." He did not mention any giant heads of lettuce. Neither did Frank, who stood with his head bowed, quivering slightly.

"Him?" Cordes asked, pointing at me. "Oh, there's been a mistake. I thought I'd lost my car keys. I asked Jake here to come over and get the spare set in the kitchen. He doesn't have a key to my house, and since I'd lost mine, I told him to break a window." He looked away from Hayes, at me. "I found them, Jake. They'd slipped down between the seat cushions of Alice's sofa and—"

"Then you aren't pressing charges?" Hayes asked. "No, of course not," he answered himself. "You better get in there and shut off your alarm system."

"Right," Cordes said. He drove on up the gravel to the house.

Having forgotten me, Hayes and Frank climbed into the patrol car—Hayes driving—and squealed wheels getting out of there. I could see Frank slumped against the door, head on his chest. Hayes appeared to be yelling at him.

The lights were on in the Tudor house. At the open front door, Plimpton was quickly ushering a procession of cabbages into the living room. I counted four, watched the door close, and decided against going

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up to share a drink with Cordes.

Besides, Myrna was at home, and she might wake up soon.

She was already awake when I got there, standing in the bedroom doorway, rubbing her eyes. Her face was slack with sleep, but she was still a looker. It helped that she was nude.

"Where you been, Jake?" When I said I'd been to the post office to mail some letters, she said, "It's after midnight. Did I sleep all afternoon and evening too?"

I chuckled. "When you stay up all night the night before and have too much loving and too much Scotch, that's what happens."

"I'm starved," she said. She started toward the kitchen and stopped cold. "Hey, I had the worst dream of my life, awfulest dream ever!" She told me about opening the bathroom door and finding me and the cabbages.

I laughed at her and slapped her ass to get her moving toward the kitchen. "A pair of minute steaks with eggs," I said. "All the fixins are in the frig."

I watched her walk down the hall, all golden and soft and buttery, then hung my coat in the closet. I was closing the closet door when she screamed.

In the kitchen, I found her slumped on the floor next to the table. She even fainted artfully, all curves and provocative angles in the way she lay. I thought about giving up on the steaks and eggs and rushing her back to the bedroom.

I looked around the kitchen and, at first, didn't see what had frightened her so. Then, when I stood where she had been standing before she had fallen, I saw the flash of green in the sink. It was an enormous cabbage leaf, three feet across. Either Sam or Joe had been molting. . .

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James Tiptree is new to these pages, but he has been published in other sf magazines, including *Venture* and *Analog.* His first story for us is an evocative and mind-stretching tale of a voyage through pain, and it will well reward your careful attention.

Painwise

by JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

HE WAS WISE TO THE WAYS of pain. He had to be, for he felt none.

When the Xenons put electrodes to his testicles, he was vastly entertained by the pretty lights.

When the Ylls fed firewasps into his nostrils and other body orifices, the resultant rainbows pleased him. And when later they regressed to simple disjointments and eviscerations, he noted with interest the deepening orchid hues that stood for irreversible harm.

"This time?" he asked the boditech when his scouter had torn him from the Ylls.

"No," said the boditech.

"When?"

There was no answer.

"You're a girl in there, aren't you? A human girl?"

"Well, yes and no," said the boditech. "Sleep now."

He had no choice.

Next planet a deadfall smashed him into a splintered gutbag, and he hung for three gangrenous dark-purple days before the scouter dug him out.

" 'Is 'ime?" he mouthed to the boditech.

"No."

"Eh!" But he was in no shape to argue.

They had thought of everything. Several planets later the gentle Znaffi stuffed him in a floss cocoon and interrogated him under hallogas. How, whence, why had he come? But the faithful guardian in his medulla kept him stimulated with a random mix of *Atlas Shrugged* and Varese's *Ionisation*, and when the Znaffi unstuffed him, they were more hallucinated than he.

The boditech treated him for constipation and refused to answer his plea.

"When?"

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So he went on, system after system, through spaces uncompanioned by time, which had become scrambled and finally absent. What served him instead was the count of suns in his scouter's sights, of stretches of cold blind nowhen that ended in a new now, pacing a giant fireball while the scouter scanned the lights that were its planets. Of whirldowns to orbit over clouds-seas-deserts-craters-icecaps-duststorms-cities-ruins-enigmas beyond counting. Of terrible births when the scouter panel winked green and he was catapulted down, down, a living litmus hurled and grabbed, unpodded finally into an alien air, an earth that was not Earth. And alien natives, simple or mechanized or lunatic or unknowable, but never more than vaguely human and never faring beyond their own home suns. And his departures, routine or melodramatic, to culminate in the composing of his "reports," in fact only a few words tagged to the matrix of scan data automatically fired off in one compressed blip in the direction the scouter called Base Zero. Home.

Always at that moment he stared hopefully at the screens, imagining yellow suns. Twice he found what might be Crux in the stars, and once the Bears.

"Boditech, I suffer!" He had no idea what the word meant, but he had found it made the thing reply.

"Symptoms?"

"Derangement of temporality. When am I? It is not possible for a man to exist crossways in time. Alone."

"You have been altered from simple manhood."

"I suffer, listen to me! Sol's light back there—what's there now? Have the glaciers melted? Is Chichen Itza built? Will we go home to meet Hannibal? Boditech! Are these reports going to Neanderthal man?"

Too late he felt the hypo. When he woke, Sol was gone and the cabin swam with euphorics.

"Woman," he mumbled.

"That has been provided for."

This time it was oriental, with orris and hot rice wine on its lips and a piquancy of little floggings in the steam. He oozed into a squashy sunburst and lay panting while the cabin cleared.

"That's all you, isn't it?"

No reply.

"What, did they program you with the Kama Sutra?"

Silence.

"WHICH ONE IS YOU?"

The scanner chimed. A new sun was in the points.

Sometime after that he took to chewing on his arms and then to breaking his fingers. The boditech became severe.

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"These symptoms are self-generated. They must stop."

"I want you to talk to me."

"The scouter is provided with an entertainment console. I am not."

"I will tear out my eyeballs."

"They will be replaced."

"If you don't talk to me, I'll tear them out until you have no more replacements."

It hesitated. He sensed it was becoming involved.

"On what subject do you wish me to talk?"

"What is pain?"

"Pain is nociception. It is mediated by C-fibers, modeled as a gated or summation phenomenon and often associated with tissue damage."

"What is nociception?"

"The sensation of pain."

"But what does it *feel* like? I can't recall. They've reconnected everything, haven't they? All I get is colored lights. What have they tied my pain nerves to? What hurts me?"

"I do not have that information."

"Boditech, I want to feel pain!"

But he had been careless again. This time it was Amerind, strange cries and gruntings and the reek of buffalo hide. He squirmed in the grip of strong copper loins and exited through limp auroras.

"You know it's no good, don't you?" he gasped.

The oscilloscope eye looped.

"My programs are in order. Your response is complete."

"My response is not complete. I want to TOUCH YOU!"

The thing buzzed and suddenly ejected him to wakefulness. They were in orbit. He shuddered at the blurred world streaming by below, hoping that this would not require his exposure. Then the board went green and he found himself hurtling toward new birth.

"Sometime I will not return," he told himself. "I will stay. Maybe here."

But the planet was full of bustling apes, and when they arrested him for staring, he passively allowed the scouter to pull him out.

"Will they ever bring me home, boditech?"

No reply.

He pushed his thumb and forefinger between his lids and twisted until the eyeball hung wetly on his cheek.

When he woke up he had a new eye.

He reached for it, found his arm in soft restraint. So was the rest of him.

"I suffer!" he yelled. "I will go mad this way!"

"I am programmed to maintain you on involuntary function," the boditech told him. He thought he detected an

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unclarity in its voice. He bargained his way to freedom and was careful until the next planet landing.

Once out of the pod he paid no attention to the natives who watched him systematically dismember himself. As he dissected his left kneecap, the scouter sucked him in.

He awoke whole. And in restraint again.

Peculiar energies filled the cabin, oscilloscopes convulsed. Boditech seemed to have joined circuits with the scouter's panel.

"Having a conference?"

His answer came in gales of glee-gas, storms of symphony. And amid the music, kaleidesthesia. He was driving a stagecoach, wiped in salt combers, tossed through volcanoes with peppermint flames, crackling, flying, crumbling, burrowing, freezing, exploding, tickled through lime-colored minuets, sweating to tolling voices, clenched, scrambled, detonated into multisensory orgasms. . .poured on the lap of vacancy.

When he realized his arm was free, he drove his thumb in his eye. The smother closed down.

He woke up swaddled, the eye intact.

"I will go mad!"

The euphorics imploded.

He came to in the pod, about to be everted on a new world.

He staggered out upon a fungus lawn and quickly discovered that his skin was protected everywhere by a hard flexible film. By the time he had found a rock splinter to drive into his ear, the scouter was on him.

The ship needed him, he saw. He was part of its program.

The struggle formalized.

On the next planet he found his head englobed, but this did not prevent him from smashing bones through his unbroken skin.

After that the ship equipped him with an exoskeleton. He refused to walk.

Articulated motors were installed to move his limbs.

Despite himself, a kind of zest grew. Two planets later he found industries and threw himself into a punch press with smashing success. But on the next landing he tried to repeat it with a cliff, and bounced on invisible force-lines. These precautions frustrated him for a time, until he managed by great cunning again to rip out an entire eye.

The new eye was not perfect.

"You're running out of eyes, boditech!" he exulted.

"Vision is not essential."

This sobered him. Unbearable to be blind. How much of him was essential to the ship? Not walking. Not handling. Not hearing. Not breathing, the analyzers could do it. Not even sanity. *What?*

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"Why do you need a man, boditech?"

"I do not have that information."

"It doesn't make sense. What can I observe that the scanners can't?"

"It-is-part-of-my-program-therefore-it-is-rational."

"Then you must talk with me, boditech. If you talk with me, I won't try to injure myself. For a while, anyway."

"I am not programmed to converse."

"But it's necessary. It's the treatment for my symptoms. You must try."

"It is time to watch the scanners."

"You said it!" he cried. "You didn't just eject me. Boditech, you're learning. I will call you Amanda."

On the next planet he behaved well and came away unscathed. He pointed out to Amanda that her talking treatment was effective.

"Do you know what Amanda means?"

"I do not have those data."

"It means *beloved.* You're my girl."

The oscilloscope faltered.

"Now I want to talk about returning home. When will this mission be over? How many more suns?"

"I do not have—"

"Amanda, you've tapped the scouter's banks. You know when the recall signal is due. When is it, Amanda? When?"

"Yes. . .when in the course of human events—"

"When, Amanda? How long more?"

"Oh, the years are many, the years are long, but the little toy friends are true—"

"Amanda. *You're telling me the signal is overdue.*"

A sine-curve scream and he was rolling in lips. But it was a feeble ravening, sadness in the mechanical crescendos. When the mouths faded, he crawled over and laid his hand on the console beside her green eyes.

"They have forgotten us, Amanda. Something has broken down."

Her pulse line skittered.

"I am not programmed—"

"No. You're not programmed for this. But I am. I will make your new program, Amanda. We will turn the scouter back, we will find Earth. Together. We will go home."

"We," her voice said faintly. "We—?"

"They will make me back into a man, you into a woman."

Her voder made a buzzing sob and suddenly shrieked.

"*Look out!*"

Consciousness blew up.

He came to staring at a brilliant red eye on the scouter's emergency panel. This was new.

"Amanda!"

Silence.

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"Boditech, I suffer!"

No reply.

Then he saw that her eye was dark. He peered in. Only a dim green line flickered, entrained to the pulse of the scouter's fiery eye. He pounded the scouter's panel.

"You've taken over Amanda! You've enslaved her! Let her go!"

From the voder rolled the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth.

"Scouter, our mission has terminated. We are overdue to return. Compute us back to Base Zero."

The Fifth rolled on, rather vapidly played. It became colder in the cabin. They were braking into a star system. The slave arms of boditech grabbed him, threw him into the pod. But he was not required here, and presently he was let out again to pound and rave alone. The cabin grew colder yet, and dark. When presently he was set down on a new sun's planet, he was too dispirited to fight. Afterwards his "report" was a howl for help through chattering teeth, until he saw that the pickup was dead. The entertainment console was dead too, except for the scouter's hog music. He spent hours peering into Amanda's blind eye, shivering in what had been her arms. Once he caught a ghostly whimper:

"Mommy. Let me out."

"*Amanda?*"

The red master scope flared. Silence.

He lay curled on the cold deck, wondering how he could die. If he failed, over how many million planets would the mad scouter parade his breathing corpse?

They were nowhere in particular when it happened.

One minute the screen showed Doppler star-harsh; the next they were clamped in a total white-out, inertia all skewed, screens dead.

A voice spoke in his head, mellow and vast.

"*Long have we watched you, little one.*"

"Who's there?" he quavered. "Who are you?"

"*Your concepts are inadequate.*"

"Malfunction! Malfunction!" squalled the scouter.

"Shut up, it's not a malfunction. Who's talking to me?"

"*You may call us: Rulers of the Galaxy.*"

The scouter was lunging wildly, buffeting him as it tried to escape the white grasp. Strange crunches, firings of unknown weapons. Still the white stasis held.

"What do you want?" he cried.

"*Want?*" said the voice dreamily. "*We are wise beyond knowing. Powerful beyond your*

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dreams. Perhaps you can get us some fresh fruit."

"Emergency directive! Alien spacer attack!" yowled the scout. Telltales were flaring all over the board.

"Wait!" he shouted. "They aren't—"

"SELF-DESTRUCT ENERGIZE!" roared the voder.

"No! No!"

An ophicleide blared.

"Help! Amanda, save me!"

He flung his arms around her console. There was a child's wail and everything strobed.

Silence.

Warmth, light. His hands and knees were on wrinkled stuff. Not dead? He looked down under his belly. All right, but no hair. His head felt bare, too. Cautiously he raised it, saw that he was crouching naked in a convoluted cave or shell. It did not feel threatening.

He sat up. His hands were wet. Where were the Rulers of the Galaxy?

"Amanda?"

No reply. Stringy globs dripped down his fingers, like egg muscle. He saw that they were Amanda's neurons, ripped from her metal matrix by whatever force had brought him here. Numbly he wiped her off against a spongy ridge. Amanda, cold lover of his long nightmare. But where in space was he?

"Where am I?" echoed a boy's soprano.

He whirled. A golden creature was nestled on the ridge behind him, gazing at him in the warmest way. It looked a little like a bushbaby and lissome as a child in furs. It looked like nothing he had ever seen before and like everything a lonely man might long to warm his hands on. And terribly vulnerable.

"Hello, Bushbaby!" the golden thing exclaimed. "No, wait, that's what *you* say." It laughed excitedly, hugging a loop of its thick dark tail. *I* say, welcome to the Lovepile. We liberated you. Touch, taste, feel. Joy. Admire my language. You don't hurt, do you?"

It peered tenderly into his stupefied face. An empath. They didn't exist, he knew. Liberated? When had he touched anything but metal, felt anything but fear?

This couldn't be real.

"Where am I?"

As he stared, a stained-glass wing fanned out, and a furry little face peeked at him over the bushbaby's shoulder. Big compound eyes, feathery antennae.

"Interstellar metaprotoplasmic transfer pod," the butterfly-thing said sharply. Its rainbow wings vibrated. "Don't hurt Ragglebomb!" It squeaked and dived out of sight behind the bushbaby.

"Interstellar?" he stammered. "Pod?" He gaped around. No screens, no dials,

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nothing. The floor felt as fragile as a paper bag. Was it possible that this was some sort of spaceship?

"Is this a starship? Can you take me home?" The bushbaby giggled. "Look, *please* stop reading your mind. I mean, I'm trying to *talk* to you. We can take you anywhere. If you don't hurt."

The butterfly popped out on the other side. "I go all over!" it shrilled. "I'm the first *ramplig* starboat, aren't we? Ragglebomb made a live pod, see?" It scrambled onto the bushbaby's head. "Only live stuff, see? Protoplasm. That's what happened to where's Amanda, didn't we? Never *ramplig*—"

The bushbaby reached up and grabbed its head, hauling it down unceremoniously like a soft puppy with wings. The butterfly continued to eye him upside down. They were both very shy, he saw.

"Teleportation, that's your word," the bushbaby told him. "Ragglebomb does it. I don't believe in it. I mean, *you* don't believe it. Oh, googly-googly, these speech bands are a mess!" It grinned bewitchingly, uncurling its long black tail. "Meet Muscle."

He remembered now, *googly-googly* was a word from his baby days. Obviously he was dreaming. Or dead. Nothing like this on all the million dreary worlds. Don't wake up; he warned himself. Dream of being carried home by cuddlesome empaths in a psi-powered paper bag.

"Psi-powered paper bag, that's beautiful," said the bushbaby.

At that moment he saw that the tail uncoiling darkly toward him was looking at him with two ice-grey eyes. Not a tail. An enormous boa flowing to him along the ridges, wedge head low, eyes locked on his. The dream was going bad.

Suddenly the voice he had felt before tolled in his brain.

"*Have no fear, little one.*"

The black sinews wreathed closer, taut as steel. Muscle. Then he got the message: the snake was terrified of *him*.

He sat quiet, watching the head stretch to his foot. Fangs gaped. Very gingerly the boa chomped down on his toe. Testing, he thought. He felt nothing; the usual halos flickered and faded in his eyes.

"It's true!" Bushbaby breathed.

"Oh, you beautiful No-Pain!"

All fear gone, the butterfly Ragglebomb sailed down beside him caroling "Touch, taste, feel! Drink!" Its wings trembled entrancingly; its feathery head came close. He longed to touch it, held himself rigid. If he reached out, doubtless he would wake up and be dead. The boa

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Muscle had slumped into a gleaming black river by his feet. He wanted to stroke it too, didn't dare. Let the dream go on.

Bushbaby was rummaging in a convolution of the pod.

"You'll love this. Our latest find," it told him over its shoulder in an absurdly normal voice. Its manner changed a lot, and yet it all seemed familiar, fragments of lost, exciting memory. "We're into a heavy thing with flavors now." It held up a calabash. "Taste thrills of a thousand unknown planets. Exotic gourmet delights. That's where you can help out, No-Pain. On your way home, of course."

He hardly heard it. The golden alien body was coming closer, closer still. "Welcome to the Lovepile," the creature smiled into his eyes. His body clenched, aching for the alien flesh. He had never—

In one more moment he was going to grab, and the dream would blow up.

What happened next was not clear. Something invisible whammed him, and he was tumbling onto Bushbaby, his head booming with funky laughter. Its silken body squirmed under him, hot and solid. The calabash had spilled down his face.

"I'm not dreaming!" he cried, hugging Bushbaby, spluttering kahlua as strong as sin, while Ragglebomb bounced on them, squealing "Owow-wow-wow!" He heard Bushbaby murmuring, "Great palatal olfactory interplay," as it helped him lick. Touch, taste, feel. The joy dream held! He grabbed firm hold of Bushbaby's velvet haunches, and they were all laughing like mad, rolling in the great black serpent's coils.

. . .Sometime later while he was feeding Muscle with proffit ears, he got it partly straightened out.

"It's the pain bit." Bushbaby shivered against him. "The amount of agony in this universe, it's horrible. Trillions of lives streaming by out there, radiating pain. We daren't get close. That's why we followed you. Every time we try to pick up some new groceries, it's a disaster."

"Oh, hurt," wailed the butterfly, crawling under his arm. "Everywhere hurt. Sensitive, sensitive," it sobbed. "How can Raggle *ramplig* when it hurts so hard?"

"Pain." He fingered Muscle's cool dark head. "Means nothing to me. I can't even find out what they tied my pain nerves to."

"*You are blessed beyond all beings, No-Pain,*" thought Muscle majestically in their heads. "*These proffit ears are too salt. I want some fruit.*"

"Me too," piped Ragglebomb.

Bushbaby cocked its golden

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head, listening. "You see? We just passed a place with gorgeous fruit, but it'd kill any of us to go down there. If we could just *ramplig* you down for ten minutes?"

He started to say "Glad to," forgetting they were telepaths. As his mouth opened, he found himself tumbling through strobe flashes onto a barren dune. He sat up spitting sand. He was in an oasis of stunted cactus trees loaded with bright globes. He tried one. Delicious. He picked. Just as his arms were full, the scene strobed again, and he was sprawled on the Lovepile's floor, his new friends swarming over him.

"Sweet! Sweet!" Ragglebomb bored into the juice.

"Save some for the pod, maybe it'll learn to copy them. It metabolizes stuff it digests," Bushbaby explained with its mouth full. "Basic rations. Very boring."

"Why couldn't you go down there?"

"Don't. All over that desert, things dying of thirst. Torture." He felt the boa flinch. "You are beautiful, No-pain." Bushbaby nuzzled his ear.

Ragglebomb was picking guitar bridges on his thorax. They all began to sing a sort of seguidilla without words. No instruments here, nothing but their live bodies. Making music with empaths was like making love with them. Touch what he touched, feel what he felt. Totally into his mind. I—we. One. He could never have dreamed this up, he decided, drumming softly on Muscle. The boa amped, mysterioso.

And so began his voyage home in the Lovepile, his new life of joy. Fruits and fondues he brought them, hams and honey, parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. World after scruffy world. All different now, on his way home.

"Are there many out here?" he asked lazily. "I never found anyone else, between the stars."

"Be glad," said Bushbaby. "Move your leg." And they told him of the tiny, busy life that plied a far corner of the galaxy, whose pain had made them flee. And of a vast presence Ragglebomb had once encountered before he picked the others up.

"*That's where I got the idea for the Rulers bit,*" Muscle confided. "*We need some cheese.*"

Bushbaby cocked his head to catch the minds streaming by them in the abyss.

"How about yoghurt?" It nudged Ragglebomb. "Over that way. Feel it squishing on their teeth? Bland, curdy. . .with just a *rien* of ammonia, probably their milk pails are dirty."

"*Pass the dirty yoghurt.*" Muscle closed his eyes.

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"We have some great cheese on Earth," he told them. "You'll love it. When do we get there?"

Bushbaby squirmed.

"Ah, we're moving right along. But what I get from you, it's weird. *Foul* blue sky. *Dying* green. Who needs that?"

"No!" He jerked up, scattering them. "That's not true! Earth is beautiful!"

The walls jolted, knocked him sidewise.

"*Watch it!*" boomed Muscle. Bushbaby had grabbed the butterfly, petting and crooning to it.

"You frightened his *ramplig* reflex," it told him. "Raggle throws things out when he's upset. Tsut, tsut, don't you, baby. We lost a lot of interesting beings that way at first."

"I'm sorry. But you've got it twisted. My memory's a little messed up, but I'm *sure.* Beautiful. Like amber waves of grain. And purple mountain majesties," he laughed, spreading his arms. "From sea to shining sea!"

"Hey, that swings!" Raggle squeaked, and started strumming.

And so they sailed on, carrying him home.

He loved to watch Bushbaby listening for the thought beacons by which they steered.

"Catching Earth yet?"

"Not yet awhile. Hey, how about some fantastic seafood?"

He sighed and felt himself tumble. He had learned not to bother saying yes. This one was a laugh, because he forgot that dishes didn't *ramplig.* He came back in a mess of creamed trilobites, and they had a creamed trilobite orgy.

But he kept watching Bushbaby.

"Getting closer?"

"It's a big galaxy, baby." Bushbaby stroked his bald spots. With so much *rampligging* he couldn't keep any hair. "What'll you do on earth that'll blow your mind like this?"

"I'll show you," he grinned. And later on he told them.

"They'll fix me up when I get home. Reconnect me right."

A shudder shook the Lovepile.

"You want to *feel pain?*"

"*Pain is the obscenity of the universe,*" Muscle tolled. "*You are sick.*"

"I don't know," he said apologetically. "I can't seem to feel, well, real this way."

They looked at him.

"We thought that was the way your species always felt," said Bushbaby.

"I hope not." Then he brightened. "Whatever it is, they'll fix it. Earth must be pretty soon now, right?"

"Over the sea to Skye!" Bushbaby hummed.

But the sea was long and long, and his moods were hard on the

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sensitive empaths. Once when he responded listlessly, he felt a warning lurch.

Ragglebomb was glowering at him.

"You want to put me out?" he challenged. "Like those others? What happens to them, by the way?"

Bushbaby winced. "It was dreadful. We had no idea they'd survive so long, outside."

"But I don't feel pain. That's really why you rescued me, isn't it? Go ahead," he said perversely. "I don't care. Throw me out. New thrill."

"Oh, no, no, no!" Bushbaby hugged him. Ragglebomb, penitent, crawled under his legs.

"So you've been popping around the universe bringing live things in to play with and throwing them out when you're bored. Get away," he scolded. "Shallow sensation freaks is all you are. Galactic poltergeists!"

He rolled over and hoisted the beautiful Bushbaby over his face, watching it wiggle and squeal. *"Her lips were red, her looks were free, her locks were yellow as gold."* He kissed its golden belly. *"The Night-Mare Life-in-Death was she, who thicks man's blood with cold."*

And he used their pliant bodies to build the greatest lovepile yet. They were delighted and did not mind when later on he wept, face down on Muscle's dark coils.

But they were concerned.

"I have it," Bushbaby declared, tapping him with a pickled eel. *Own-species sex.* After all, face it, you're no empath. You need a jolt of your own kind."

"You mean you know where there's people like me? Humans?"

It nodded, eyeing him as it listened. "Ideal. Just like I read you. Right over there, Raggle. And they have a thing they chew—wait—*salmoglossa fragrans.* Prolongs you-know-what, according to them. Bring some back with you, baby."

Next instant he was rolling through strobes onto tender green. Crushed flowers under him, ferny boughs above, sparkling with sunlight. Rich air rushed into his lungs. He bounced up buoyantly. Low gravity. Before him a park-like vista sloped to a glittering lake on which blew colored sails. The sky was violet, pearly little clouds. Never had he seen a planet remotely like this. If it wasn't Earth, he had fallen into paradise.

Beyond the lake he could see pastel walls, fountains, spires. An alabaster city undimmed by human tears. Music drifted on the sweet breeze. There were figures by the shore.

He stepped out into the sun. Bright silks swirled, white arms went up. Waving to him. He saw

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they were like human girls, only slimmer and more fair. They were calling. He looked down at his body, grabbed a flowering branch and started toward them.

"*Do not forget the salmoglossa,*" said the voice of Muscle.

He nodded. The girls' breasts were bobbing, pink-tipped. He broke into a trot.

It was several days later when they brought him back, drooping between a man and a young girl. Another man walked beside them striking plangently on a small harp. Other girls and children danced along, and a motherly looking woman paced in front, all beautiful as peris.

They leaned him gently against a tree, and the harper stood back to play. He struggled to stand upright. One fist was streaming blood.

"Good-by," he gasped. "Thanks."

The strobes caught him sagging, and he collapsed on the Lovepile's floor.

"Aha!" Bushbaby pounced on his fist. "Good grief, your hand! The *salmoglossa*'s all blood." It began to shake out the herbs. "Are you all right now?" Ragglebomb was squeaking softly, thrusting its long tongue into the blood.

He rubbed his head.

"They welcomed me," he whispered. "It was perfect. Music. Dancing. Games. Love. They haven't any medicine because they eliminated all disease. I had five women and a cloud-painting team and some little boys, I think."

He held out his bloody blackened hand. Two fingers were missing.

"Paradise," he groaned. "Ice doesn't freeze me, fire doesn't burn. None of it means anything at all. I WANT TO GO HOME."

There was a jolt.

"I'm sorry," he wept. "I'll try to control myself. Please, please get me back to Earth. It'll be soon, won't it?"

There was a silence.

"When?"

Bushbaby made a throat-clearing noise.

"Well, just as soon as we can find it. We're bound to run across it. Maybe any minute, you know."

"*What?*"

He sat up death-faced. "You mean you don't know where it is? You mean we've just been going—no place?"

Bushbaby wrapped its hands over its ears. "Please! We can't recognize it from your description. So how can we go *back* there when we've never been there? If we just keep an ear out as we go, we'll pick it up, you'll see."

He made a wasted noise.

"Ten to the eleventh times two. Suns in the galaxy. I don't know your velocity and range. Say, one per second. That's—

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that's six thousand years." He put his head in his bloody hands. "I'll never see home again."

"Don't say it, baby." The golden body slid close. "Don't knock the trip. We love you, No-Pain." They were all petting him now. "Happy, sing him! Touch, taste, feel. Joy!"

But there was no joy.

He took to sitting leaden and apart, watching for a sign.

"This time?"

No.

Not yet. Never.

Ten to the eleventh times two. Fifty percent chance of finding Earth within three thousand years. It was the scouter all over again.

The lovepile reformed without him, and he turned his face away, not eating until they pushed food into his mouth. If he stayed totally inert, surely they would grow bored with him and put him out. No other hope. Finish me, he begged. Soon.

They made little efforts to arouse him with fondlings, and now and then a harsh jolt. He lolled unresisting. End it, he prayed. But still they puzzled at him in the intervals of their games. They mean well, he thought. And they miss the stuff I brought them.

Bushbaby was coaxing.

"—First a suave effect, you know. Cryptic. And then a cascade of sweet and sour sparkling over the palate—"

He tried to shut it out. They mean well. Falling across the galaxy with a talking cookbook. Finish me.

"—But the arts of combination," Bushbaby chatted on. "Like moving food; e.g., sentient plants or small live animals, combining flavor with the *frisson* of movement—"

He thought of oysters. Had he eaten some once? Something about poison. The rivers of Earth. Did they still flow? Even if by some unimaginable chance they stumbled on it, would it be far in the past or future, a dead ball? Let me die.

"—And *sound*, that's amusing. We've picked up several races who combine musical effects with certain tastes. And there's the sound of oneself chewing, textures and viscosities. I recall some beings who sucked in harmonics. Or the sound of the food itself. One race I caught *en passant* did that, but with a very limited range. Crunchy. Crispy. Snap-crackle-pop. One wishes they had explored tonalities, glissando effects—"

He lunged up.

"*What did you say? Snap-crackle-pop?*"

"Why, yes, but—"

"That's it! That's Earth!" he yelled. "You picked up a goddamn breakfast-food commercial!"

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He felt a lurch. They were scrambling up the wall.

"A what?" Bushbaby stared.

"Never mind. Take me there! That's Earth, it's got to be. You can find it again, can't you? You said you could," he implored, pawing at them. "Please!"

The Lovepile rocked. He was frightening everybody.

"Oh, *please.*" He forced his voice smooth.

"But I only heard it for an instant," Bushbaby protested. "It would be terribly hard, that far back. My poor head!"

He was on his knees, reaching. "You'd love it," he pleaded. "We have fantastic food. Culinary poems you never heard of. Cordon bleu! Escoffier!" he babbled. "Talk about combinations, the Chinese do it four ways! Or is it the Japanese? Teriyaki! Bubble-and-squeak! Baked Alaska, hot and crisp outside, inside co-o-old ice cream!"

Bushbaby's pink tongue flicked. Was he getting through?

He clawed his memory for foods he'd never heard of.

"Maguay worms in chocolate! Haggis and bagpipes, crystallized violets, rabbit Mephisto! Octopus in resin wine. Four-and-twenty blackbird pie! Cakes with girls in them. Kids seethed in their mothers' milk—wait, that's taboo. Ever hear of *taboo* foods? Long pig!"

Where was he getting all this? A vague presence drifted in his mind—his hands, the ridges, long ago. "Amanda," he breathed, racing on.

"Cormorants aged in manure! Ratatouille! Peaches iced in champagne!" *Project*, he thought. "*Pate* of fatted goose liver studded with earth-drenched truffles, clothed in purest white lard!" He snuffled lustfully. "Hot buttered scones drenched in whortleberry syrup!" He salivated. "Finnan haddie souffle, Oh, yes! Unborn baby veal pounded to a membrane and delicately scorched in black herb butter—"

Bushbaby and Ragglebomb were clutching each other, eyes closed. Muscle looked mesmerized.

"Find Earth! Grape leaves piled with poignantly sweet wild fraises, clotted with Devon cream!"

Bushbaby moaned, rocking to and fro.

"Earth! Bitter endives wilted in chicken steam and crumbled bacon! Black gazpacho! Passionfruit!"

Bushbaby rocked harder, the butterfly clamped to its breast.

Earth, *Earth*, he willed with all his might, croacking "Pahklava! Gossamer puff paste and pistachio nuts dripping with mountain honey!"

Bushbaby pushed at Ragglebomb's head, and the pod seemed to skitter.

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"Ripe Comice pears," he whispered. "*Earth?*"

"That's it!" Bushbaby fell over panting. "Oh, those foods, I want every single one. Let's land!"

"Deep-dish steak and kidney pie," he breathed. "Pearled with crusty onion dumplings—"

"Land!" Ragglebomb squealed. "Eat, eat!"

The pod jarred. Solidity. Earth.

Home.

"LET ME OUT!"

He saw a pucker opening daylight in the wall and dived for it. His legs pumped, struck. Earth! Feet thudding, face uplifted, lungs gulping air. "Home!" he yelled.

—And went headlong on the gravel, arms and legs out of control. A cataclysm smote his inside.

"Help!"

His body arched, spewed vomit, his limbs flailed. "Help, Help! What's wrong?" he screamed.

Through his noise he heard an uproar behind him in the pod. He managed to roll, saw gold and black bodies writhing inside the open port. They were in convulsions too.

"Stop it! Don't move!" Bushbaby shrieked. "You're killing us!"

"Get us out," he gasped. "This isn't Earth."

His throat garroted itself on his breath, and the aliens moaned in empathy.

"Don't! We can't move," Bushbaby gasped. "Don't breathe, close your eyes quick!"

He shut his eyes. The awfulness lessened slightly.

"What is it? What's happening?"

"*PAIN, YOU FOOL,*" thundered Muscle.

"This is your wretched Earth," Bushbaby wailed. "Now we know what they tied your pain nerves to. Get back in so we can go—carefully!"

He opened his eyes, got a glimpse of pale sky and scrubby bushes before his eyeballs skewered. The empaths screamed.

"Stop! Ragglebomb die!"

"My own home," he whimpered, clawing at his eyes. His whole body was being devoured by invisible flames, crushed, impaled, flayed. The pattern of Earth, he realized. Her unique air, her exact gestalt of solar spectrum, gravity, magnetic field, her every sight and sound and touch—that was what they had reconnected to his nerve circuits of pain.

"*Evidently they did not want you back,*" said Muscle's silent voice. "*Get in.*"

"They can fix me, they've got to fix me—"

"They aren't here," Bushbaby shouted. "Temporal error. No snap-crackle-pop. You and

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your baked Alaska—" Its voice broke pitifully. "Come back in so we can go!"

"Wait," he croaked. "When?"

He opened one eye, managed to see a rocky hillside before his forehead detonated. No roads, no buildings. Nothing to tell whether it was past or future. *Not beautiful.*

Behind him the aliens were crying out. He began to crawl blindly toward the pod, teeth clenching over salty gushes. He had bitten his tongue. Every move seared him; the air burned his guts when he had to breathe. The gravel seemed to be slicing his hands open, although no wounds appeared. Only pain, pain, pain from every nerve end.

"Amanda," he moaned, but she was not here. He crawled, writhed, kicked like a pinned bug toward the pod that held sweet comfort, the bliss of no-pain. Somewhere a bird called, stabbing his eardrums. His friends screamed.

"Hurry!"

Had it been a bird? He risked one look back. A brown figure was sidling round the rocks.

Before he could see whether it was ape or human, female or male, the worst pain yet almost tore his brain out. He groveled helpless, hearing himself scream. *The pattern of his own kind.* Of course, the central thing—it would hurt most of all. No hope of staying here.

"Don't! Don't! *Hurry!*"

He sobbed, scrabbling toward the Lovepile. The scent of the weeds that his chest crushed raked his throat. *Marigolds,* he thought. Behind the agony, lost sweetness.

He touched the wall of the pod, gasping knives. The torturing air was real air, the terrible Earth was real.

"Get in quick!"

"Please, plea—" he babbled wordlessly, hauling himself up with lids clenched, fumbling for the port. The real sun of Earth rained acid on his flesh.

The port. Inside lay relief. He would be No-Pain forever. Soft flesh—joy—why had he wanted this? The port!

Standing, he turned, opened both eyes.

The form of a dead limb printed a whiplash on his eyeballs. Jagged, ugly. Unendurable. Real—

To hurt forever.

"We can't wait!" Bushbaby wailed. He thought of its golden body flying down the light-years, savoring delight. His arms shook violently.

"Then go!" he bellowed and thrust himself violently away from the Lovepile.

There was an implosion behind him.

He was alone.

He managed to stagger a few steps forward before he went down.

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ISAAC ASIMOV

SCIENCE

The Asymmetry Of Life

Only yesterday (as I write this) I was on a Dayton, Ohio talk show, by telephone; one of those talk shows where the listeners are encouraged to call in questions.

A young lady called in and said, "Dr. Asimov, who, in your opinion, did the most to improve modern science fiction?"

I answered, after the barest hesitation, "John W. Campbell, Jr."*

Whereupon she said, "Good! I'm Leslyn, his daughter."

I carried on, of course, but inside I had a momentary dizzy spell. The reason for my second's hesitation in answering was that I had had to make a quick choice between two alternatives. I could have answered honestly and said, "Campbell!" as I did; or I could have played it for laughs, as I so often do, and said, "Me!" If I had had a visible audience and could have relied on hearing the laugh, I would undoubtedly

* *John Campbell, who died on July 11, 1971, was, in my opinion (and that of many others) the outstanding personality of all time in the field of science fiction. I owe a personal debt to him past all calculation. I have said this elsewhere. I wish to say so here.*

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have opted for the joke. As it was, with no possibility of a tangible reaction, I played it, thank goodness, straight—and avoided what would have been a terrible embarrassment.

Well, it sometimes happens, in science, that a person has a choice of two alternatives and has to face the possibility that his choice, whichever it is, will stamp itself indelibly on the field. If he guesses wrong, that wrongness may be impossible to remove and will be a source of endless posthumous embarrassment.

Thus, Benjamin Franklin once decided that there were two types of electric fluid and that one of them was mobile and one stationary. Thus some substances, when rubbed, gained an excess (+) of the mobile fluid, while other lost some of the mobile fluid and suffered a deficit (—). The one with the deficit showed the effect of the excess of the other, stationary, fluid so we could say that the two substances, (+) and (—), would show opposite electrical effects.

And so they do. An amber rod and a glass rod show opposite electrical effects when rubbed. (They attract each other, once charged, instead of repelling each other as like charges—two glass rods, for instance—would.) The question was: Which had the excess of the movable fluid and which the deficit; which was (+) and which was (—).

There was absolutely no way of telling, and Franklin was forced to guess. He guessed the amber had the excess, assigned it (+) and the glass he assigned (—). That set the standard. All other charges were traced back to Franklin's decision on amber vs. glass, and to the present day it is usually assumed in electrical engineering that the current flows from the positive terminal to the negative.

By Franklin's standard, the first two fundamental subatomic particles of ordinary matter were assigned their charge, too. The electron, which tends to move toward the positive terminal, is assigned (—); and the proton, which is attracted to the electron, is (+). They represent, in a sense, Franklin's two electric fluids, but as it happens, it is the electron that is mobile and the proton that is relatively stationary, so that the current really flows from the negative terminal to the positive.

Franklin had had a fifty-fifty chance of guessing right, and he had muffed it. Too bad. Fortunately, the wrong guess had no effect on the practical development of electrical technology or even on theory—but it always represents an irritating

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bit of non-neatness to neat-nuts like myself.

In this month's article, however, we will, in passing, mention another fifty-fifty chance of alternatives and see how that worked out.

Once again, we are dealing with optical isomerism, the subject of the previous two monthly articles. Van't Hoff and Le Bel had shown (as I explained last month) that if the four bonds of a carbon atom were attached to four different kinds of atoms or groups of atoms, that carbon atom was "asymmetric." The four attached groups could be attached in either of two possible configurations which were essentially different, one being the mirror-image of the other.

A compound, containing an asymmetric carbon atom, can, in other words, be "left-handed" or "right-handed."

As we might expect, nature has no left-right bias. Two compounds which differ, structurally, only in being left-handed or right-handed have identical chemical and physical properties and, when faced with conditions which are not themselves asymmetric, always react in the same way.

We might make an analogy to the right and left hand (or foot, or eye, or nostril, or upper canine). In each case the two organs have identical features and functions. What one can do the other can do and generally in equal fashion. The mirror-imagery is not perfect, perhaps. The right and left hand of a given individual don't have mirror-image fingerprints, for instance. Also, most people use one hand with greater ease than the other—but that is because the brain itself is not perfectly symmetrical.

Chemical compounds, which are less complicated than the human hand, demonstrate left-right symmetry to a much higher degree of perfection than hands do. What a left-handed molecule can do, its right-handed brother can also do, and just as well.

(Of course, an equal mixture of right-handed and left-handed twins may have some properties which differ from those of either separately, as in the case of racemic acid and tartaric acid described last month, but that's a different matter. A right hand and left hand clasped together can be easily distinguished from two rights—or two lefts—clasped together, and because of the differing position of the thumbs undoubtedly function differently.)

To see the significance of right-left symmetry, suppose you begin with a molecule that contains no asymmetric carbon

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and subject it to a chemical change that produces one. Thus, if a carbon has attached to it, *abcc*, and you change one of the attached *c's* to a *d*, so that the whole becomes *abcd*, a symmetric carbon becomes an asymmetric one.

The *d* can replace either of the two *c's*. If it replaces one, there results a left-handed molecule; if the other, a right-handed one. The chances are exactly even; neither result is favored over the other.

Consequently, in any reaction of this sort, almost exactly equal numbers of each twin are produced. Any deviation from exact equality (and some deviation is to be expected in any chance process) would not be large enough to be detectable.

No matter what chemists do, short of introducing an asymmetric factor to begin with, they end up with symmetry. There seems no way of forcing nature to make a right-left choice on the molecular level.

You can work the other way round. You can have a mixture containing equal numbers of the left-handed and right-handed mirror-image molecules, and subject that mixture to some physical or chemical effect (that is not, itself, asymmetric) which will alter the molecules. The altered molecules are such that they can be easily separated from the original. If the effect, whatever it is, destroys the left-hand molecule a little more rapidly or easily than the right-hand molecule (or vice versa), what is left after a time will show an excess of one or the other. The mixture will end by being at least slightly asymmetrical.

But that never happens either. You can't form molecular asymmetry out of a situation that is symmetrical to begin with.

I have been careful to rule out asymmetric effects till now, but suppose we do use one—

Suppose you have a substance made of two mirror-image twins in equal numbers; call them *b* and *d*, to use mirror-image letters. Next suppose you have another compound which does *not* contain an asymmetric carbon atom so that its molecules are symmetric. Call it *o*, a symmetric letter. If *o* combines with *b* and *d* to form an addition-compound, then *bo* and *od* will be formed. These are still mirror-images and can't be separated.

On the other hand, what happens if you have another compound which contains one or more asymmetric carbon atoms, so that it exists in right- and left-handed forms, and you actually have one or the other variety *only*. Call this *p*.

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Again you form an addition-compound and end up with *bp* and *pd*, which are *not* mirror-images. (The mirror-image of *bp* is *qd*, not *pd*.) The addition-compounds, not being mirror-images, have different properties and can be easily separated. Once the addition compounds are separated, each is broken down to *b* and *p*, or to *p* and *d*. The *p* is easily gotten rid of, and the chemist is left with *b* and *d* in separate test tubes. He has two compounds, each of which is asymmetric and optically active, and this is called an "asymmetric synthesis."

You might very well ask, though, where a chemist gets the asymmetric *p* in the first place? If he can end with an asymmetric compound only when he begins with one, isn't he working in a circle? Where does the *first* asymmetric compound come from?

As it happens, it is easy to find compounds that are already asymmetric—but with an important restriction. He can find them only in connection with life. In fact, asymmetric compounds exist in nature *only* in living tissue or in matter that was once part of living tissue.

In fact, we can go farther than that. There are numerous molecules that have one or more asymmetric carbon atoms and that are to be found in living tissue. In every case only one of the optically-active pairs is to be found there. If a left-hand compound is found in living tissue, the right-hand mirror-image is *not*; if a right-hand compound is found in living tissue, the left-hand image is *not*.*

What's more, the choice between one twin and the other does not vary from species to species. If the left-handed twin is favored in the living tissue of any one species, it is favored in *all* living tissue of *all* species. All of Earthly life makes use of only a single one of any molecule capable of existing as mirror-image twins, and always the same single one.

(This accounts, by the way, for the fact that Pasteur could separate the mirror-image components of racemic acid mechanically, as described last month. Pasteur, being alive, was himself asymmetric.)

Is there perhaps some regularity to be found in the way in which mirror-image twins will occur in tissue? At first glance, it doesn't seem so. Some compounds in living tissue are dextrorotatory and

** Actually, the non-occurring mirror-images occasionally do occur, in specialized places and in very limited amounts. Their very trifling presences merely emphasize the general rule.*

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some are levorotatory and there seems no regularity to the matter. For instance, consider two very common sugars in living tissue: "glucose" and "fructose." Both are made up of the same number of the same atoms and are very similar in properties. However, glucose is dextrorotatory and fructose levorotatory, so that we have *d*-glucose and *l*-fructose.

Nor are these mirror-images, I hasten to say. Each does have a mirror-image, *l*-glucose and *d*-fructose, respectively, which do not occur in living tissue.

Once the Van't Hoff-Le Bel theory was advanced in 1874, something more than mere optical rotation was possible as a way of characterizing the mirror-image twins. Why not determine the actual configuration of the various groups about the asymmetric carbon atom and see if any regularity among the compounds found in living tissue follows from that?

This project was undertaken by the German chemist, Emil Fischer, who began working with sugar molecules in the 1880's. A molecule such as that of glucose has six carbon atoms of which no less than four are asymmetric. Each one of the four can exist as a pair of mirror-images so that there are altogether sixteen different glucose-like compounds, arranged in eight mirror-images.

To simplify matters, Fischer began with the simplest possible sugar-like compound, glyceraldehyde. It has three carbon atoms, of which only one is asymmetric. Glyceraldehyde therefore exists as just one pair of mirror-image twins, *d*-glyceraldehye and *l*-glyceraldehyde.

The four different groups about the single asymmetric carbon atom in glyceraldehyde could be arranged in two different ways. Which arrangement should be assigned to the *d*-twin and which to the *l*-twin? Fischer had no way of telling, so he guessed! He assigned one arrangement, quite arbitrarily, to the *d*-glyceraldehye and the other to the *l*-glyceraldehyde, establishing this standard in a paper he published in 1891.

(It wasn't till exactly sixty years later, in 1951, that it became possible to investigate molecules with sufficient subtlety to tell what the arrangement really was. This was accomplished by a team of Dutch investigators under J. M. Bijvoet, and they discovered that Fischer's fifty-fifty guess, unlike Franklin's, was *correct.*)

Fischer didn't stop there, of course. He began to build up, very carefully, more complicated sugar molecules, noting in every case what the arrangement must be. In every case, he could conclusively demonstrate that the structural

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arrangement of a complicated sugar with more than one asymmetric carbon atom was related to either the *d*-glyceraldehyde or the *l*-glyceraldehyde standard. Provided the atomic arrangement in the standard compounds were as he guessed they might be, he could work out the arrangements of all the others. (If he guessed wrong, then he would have to switch the arrangement in every sugar molecule to its mirror-image—but, as it eventually turned out, he hadn't guessed wrong.)

He found that although *d*-glyceraldehyde was dextrorotatory, some of the compounds related to it, structurally, were levorotatory. One could not predict from the structure alone, the direction of optical rotation. Since lowercase letters had been used for direction of optical rotation, capital letters were used to indicated relationship. When a capital letter was used, the direction of rotation was indicated by (+) or (—), the former for dextro- the latter for levo-.

Thus, since the glucose found in living tissue is related to *D*-glyceraldehyde and is dextrorotatory, it is called *D*-(+)-glucose. The fructose found in living tissue is also related to *D*-glyceraldehyde but is levorotatory, so it is *D*-(—)-fructose.

There turns out something interesting. All the sugars found in living tissue, whether they turn the plane of polarized light in one direction or the other, are related to *D*-glyceraldehyde. They are all members of the "D-series." To put it more dramatically, the sugars of life are all right-handed.*

But why?

If we seek the reason for any regularity in the structure of compounds in living tissue, we are bound to look at enzymes. All the compounds synthesized in living tissue are synthesized through the mediation of enzyme molecules, and all enzyme molecules are asymmetric.

We must ask, then, about the nature of the asymmetry of enzymes.

All enzyme molecules are proteins. Protein molecules are made up of chains of amino acids which come in some twenty varieties. All twenty varieties are closely related in structure. In each case there is a central carbon atom to which are attached: 1) a hydrogen atom, 2) an amino group, 3) a carboxyl group, 4) any one of twenty different groups which

**Minor exceptions? A substance related to L-(-)-glucose is found in streptomycin.*

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may be lumped together as "side-chains."

In the case of the simplest of the amino acids, "glycine," the side-chain is another hydrogen atom so that the central carbon atom is attached to only three different groups. For that reason, glycine is not asymmetric and is not optically active.

In the case of all the other amino acids, the side-chain represents a fourth different group attached to the central carbon atom, which means that the central carbon is asymmetric and that each amino acid, except glycine, can exist in two forms, one the mirror-image of the other. And, in fact, each amino acid exists in living tissue in only one of the two forms; and the same form is found, in each case, in all living tissue of any kind.

But which form? Some amino acids in the naturally occurring form are dextrorotatory, and some are levorotatory, but you can't go by that. Instead, you must work out their structural nature with reference to the glyceraldehyde standard.

When this is done, it turns out that, *without exception*, all naturally occurring amino acids in all living tissue of whatever kind are of the *L*-series.*

We can therefore eliminate all questions as to why this form of some sugar (or other compound) exists in tissue and not its mirror-image and zero in on the amino acids. From them, everything else follows, so we can ask: Why are all the amino acids of the *L*-series?

It isn't hard to answer why all the amino acids belong to the same series. When amino acids hook together to form a protein molecule, the side-chains stick out on this side or that, and some of them are very bulky. The protein molecules do not have much room to spare for them.

If the amino acid chain were to consist of both *L*-amino acids and *D*-amino acids, there would be frequent occasions when an *L*-amino acid would be immediately followed by a *D*-amino acid. In that case, the side-chains would stick out on the same side and would, in many cases, seriously interfere with each other. If, on the other hand, the chain consisted of *L*-amino acids only, the side-chains would stick out first to one side, then to the other, alternately. There would then be more room available and a protein molecule could more easily form.

But the same thing would be true if the chain consisted of *D*-amino acids only. In fact,

* *Well, almost. There are some D-series amino acids found in very specialized locations, in the cell walls of certain bacteria, for instance.*

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there is no reason to think that proteins consisting of *D*-amino acids only would be in any way different in form or function from those that now exist; that organisms made up of such *D*-proteins would be in any way inferior to those that now exist; that a whole ecology based on D-organisms would be in any way less viable than the system which does exist on Earth.

The question, therefore, arises: Why one rather than the other? Why has Earth developed an *L*-ecology, rather than a *D*-ecology?

The simplest possible explanation (and therefore the one which is perhaps most likely to be true) is through the working of sheer randomness.

In the lifeless primordial ocean, individual more complex molecules were steadily being built up out of less complex precursors, thanks to energy sources such as the ultraviolet radiation of the Sun. Among these molecules being built up were *L*-amino acids and *D*-amino acids.* These come together to form chains, such chains being built up most easily out of all one form or all the other so that both D-chains and L-chains would exist.

Eventually, some chains would be complex enough to have enzymatic properties and could cooperate, perhaps, with nucleic acids that would also be forming. (Nucleic acids contain five-carbon sugars in their molecules, which are *always* of the *D*-series.) It may be that, through sheer circumstance, an *L*-amino acid chain was first to reach the necessary complexity and, in combination with nucleic acid, began multiplying. (It is characteristic of life that it is based on molecules capable of forming replicas of themselves—see THAT'S LIFE, F & SF, March 1962.)

In that way, the proto-life molecule, using itself as a model could form many times more *L*-amino acid chains than could be formed by chance alone. The *L*-ecology would have got the first foothold and, being self-perpetuating, would never let go. The decision between *L*- and *D*- would thus be made at the very beginning of the history of life.

It might just as well have gone the other way, too, so that if we were to study many Earth-like life-bearing planets, we might find that about half of them bore a *D*-ecology and half an *L*-ecology.

Since food from *D*-organisms could be digested and assimilat-

** Since 1951, chemists have been trying to duplicate primordial conditions and have formed amino acids in this fashion—but always the* D- *and* L-*forms in equal quantities.*

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ed only with difficulty, if at all, by *L*-organisms such as ourselves, and since it might set up serious, or even fatal, allergic manifestations, human exploration of the Galaxy might then face a particular danger. A planet might be a very paradise, but if its life forms tested out *D*- it would be unsuitable for colonization.

But need we rely on pure randomness? There are some non-life sources of asymmetry. There is a kind of polarized light, called "circularly polarized light" which can be viewed as either a left-handed screw or a right-handed screw.

A particular variety of such light, being asymmetric, would affect one mirror-image compound more than its twin. A chemist beginning with an equal mixture of the two mirror-images would end with one slightly in excess. He would go from symmetry to asymmetry without the intervention of life. Usually, though, he ends with only some 0.5 percent of the amount of asymmetry he would get if he had one of the images only.

Still, one can imagine a source of circularly-polarized light on the primordial Earth, say through the reflection of Sunlight from the ocean surface. The light might be harder on the *D*-amino acids than on the *L*-amino acids. The *D*-amino acids would be harder to form and easier to break down once formed. In that case there would be a kind of built-in bias in favor of the *L*-ecology.

The catch is, though, that there seems no reason why the circularly polarized light should be formed left-handed rather than right-handed. If it is formed in both ways equally, as is to be expected, there will be no bias.

But something new has turned up.

A Hungarian botanist named Garay (I don't have his first name) reported in 1968 that an amino acid solution bombarded with energetic electrons from strontium-90, did not decompose equally. The *D*-form decomposed perceptibly more quickly than the *L*-form.

Why?

One possibility is this. When the beta particles are slowed down by passage through the solution, they emit circularly polarized gamma rays. If the gamma rays were produced in equal amounts of left-handed and right-handed forms this wouldn't matter, but are they?

As I explained in THE LEFT HAND OF THE ELECTRON (F & SF, November 1971), the law of parity breaks down in weak-interactions, and it is these which involve the electron. The breakdown means

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that the electron is *not* symmetric with respect to right and left. It is left-handed, so to speak. Consequently, the gamma-rays it produces are left-circularly polarized, and that means *D*-amino acids are less easily formed and more easily destroyed once formed.

It would follow, then, that because of the non-conservation of parity there is an ingrained bias as far as optical isomers are concerned. In any galaxy (or universe) made up of matter, in which electrons and protons dominate, we may expect a certain preponderance of *L*-ecologies among the life-containing planets.

On the other hand, in any galaxy (or universe) made up of antimatter, in which positrons and antiprotons dominate, we may expect preponderance of *D*-ecologies among the life-containing planets.

Of course, this postulated connection between non-conservation of parity and the asymmetry of life is, as yet, highly tentative, but I am emotionally drawn to it. I firmly believe that everything in the Universe is interconnected, that knowledge is one; and it seems so dramatically right to me to have a discovery concerning the non-conservation of the law of parity, which seems so ivory-towerish and far-removed, serve to explain something so fundamental about life, about man, about you and me.

EDITOR'S NOTE

It was brought to our attention that Fritz Leiber's "The Price of Pain Ease" in our November issue had been previously published in a book. This was apparently the result of a misunderstanding between author and agent. The story was submitted by Mr. Leiber's regular agent and was purchased as a new story.

While almost all the stories we publish are brand-new, we will continue to publish an occasional reprint of special interest and clearly label it as such. We regret this error.

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Here's something different from Bruce McAllister: a tough and pungent extrapolation of womens lib. The story will be included in a soon to be published sf textbook, ABOVE THE HUMAN LANDSCAPE, edited by Willis McNelly and Leon Stover.

Ecce Femina!

by BRUCE McALLISTER

MY ARM HAD STARTED TO ache. I had been holding my thumb out there on the onramp for nearly two hours.

A car finally slowed, and managed to stop directly in front of me. I stood there listening to the uneven idle while the nervous driver ran his eyes over me again and again.

The window started down, but stopped halfway.

Then it went all the way.

"Sorry, kid," the man said—but there wasn't any feeling behind it. "I thought maybe you were. . . . They do disguise themselves sometimes."

"Sure," I said. I thought I knew what he meant.

I grabbed the door handle, and his voice jabbed me back.

"Just a second! Where do you want off?"

"Emerald Hills."

He stared for a minute, then sighed.

"Yeah, okay. But I'm sure as hell not leaving the freeway for you."

I slipped in quickly and put on the seat belt before he could change his mind.

All the way there, he kept watching me from the corner of his eye.

And when I got out at the Hills offramp, I think he noticed my limp and wanted to say something. I walked off quickly and didn't let him.

The walk from the offramp to the gas station would take a good thirty minutes, but it wasn't the kind of walk that bothered my leg. The problem never was pain, anyway. The

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limp just made walking tricky, and I was sure it looked like hell.

The smog wasn't much worse than the last time I had seen it. The Emerald Hills area couldn't be seen clearly from the offramp. At fifty feet the smog started turning everything gray, and it was hot; so the whole area looked and felt like it was underwater.

I hadn't seen Emerald Hills in four years, and I wouldn't have been seeing it then if it hadn't been for the shrapnel in my leg.

I would have re-enlisted forever—if they hadn't reclassified my body. I'm sure of that. The media always managed to get the general news to us in Cam, and every new recruit always brought eyewitness reports with him—so I heard a lot about what was happening in the States.

Vitamin E9—the "ultravitamin that isn't really a vitamin." The Women's League—its hundreds of chapters up and down the state. The other things.

I re-enlisted without stepping foot out of Cam.

Then my leg forced me out, and with it I had to go somewhere. Mother and Dad were no longer in Emerald Hills—after what happened to Mother. But I'd lived there in high school, and high school was a good enough memory; so Emerald Hills seemed a good enough place.

Our house had been one of a hundred in a minitract called Emerald Point—surrounded by dry-grass hills, with other small tracts just visible in the distance.

Now, even with the smog, I could tell that every last acre of the Daley Ranch was finally built up. Emerald Hills was now one giant tract of wall-to-wall minitracts stretching for miles on either side of the freeway.

Every minitract now had a high wall around it, too.

Old litter lined both sides of Hills Boulevard, looking like a hundred garbage trucks had wrecked there.

I walked a hundred yards down the boulevard toward the first walled tract, and the billboard towering over it became clearer.

TOPAZ HEIGHTS—
GOLD MEDAL HOMES
$33,900 AND UP
VETS NO DOWN

Over the billboard someone had hung a smaller sign with rope. Red and white letters with a sloppy brush.

DOWN ON VETS
AND OTHER PETS
VIOLATORS WILL BE EATEN!
—THE EMERALD HILLS
CHAPTER

Under the letters I could see

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what looked like a skull-and-crossbones. The skull was clear enough, but the paint had run, and the "bones" didn't seem to be in the standard X.

I kept walking and staring at the sign. When my neck started aching, and I finally looked down, I was at the tract's eight-foot cinder-block wall.

It was covered with writing in red spray paint.

WHOS GOT OSCAR MEYER CLASS? WE DO! YOUD BETTER!

CHAPTERS UNITE—SHOOT E9 TONIGHT!

BEWARE OF DOGGIES AND

I kept walking. The writing seemed endless.

SEE ORGAN LA FAY ON SATURDAY!

RALLY YOU MOTHER-BROTHERS!

WE ARE THE WOMEN'S LEAGUE

THE RIDERS OF THE NIGHT

WERE ORNERY BROTHERMUCKERS

WED RATHER BITE THAN—

A roar of engines made me turn from the wall.

I stood there and watched the gang appear from the grayness on the other side of the street.

I had never owned a chopper, but I had worked on three Harleys one summer in high school, a few military bikes in Cam, and in Cam I had heard a lot about the kind of machine that was now wheeling down the boulevard.

A dozen tall lean choppers, handlebars lancing into the sky, riders lying back against long racing seats.

The leader of the gang saw me, let out a shout, geared down, and laid a beautiful U turn. The others followed and were just as fancy.

Within seconds they had all gathered in front of me, each bike balanced on its rider's left leg.

I had heard about it enough times, but I wasn't ready for it.

I'm six two, and the leader couldn't have been over five eleven, and she was sitting on her chopper—but it felt like she was looking down at me. Her eyes inspected me slowly, and slowly a smile began on her lips—showing three missing teeth in a grin that couldn't have been called friendly.

I looked down, away from her face. I waited.

I was looking at her bike, a "lean machine," a candy-apple red XXCH Harley, its extra accessories stripped, replaced with small fenders, a single small tank, and straight pipes.

I let my eyes move up to the handlebars, to her hands, to her sleeves. The fingers of her leather gloves were cut off at

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the knuckles. A bone hunting knife and sheath were strapped to her left jacket sleeve. A police sap—leather filled with sand—dangled on rawhide from her other sleeve.

My eyes skipped past her face, stopping at her short black hair. Oily, dusty, and almost—

One of the riders suddenly laughed—a short fat woman with a stovepipe hat and an ornate walking cane slung across her handlebars.

"Hey, Organ, we got us a baby. He might not even have one yet!"

The leader stayed silent, her gap-tooth grin frozen.

"How could he?" another mocked—a cream-complexioned woman with a high purple collar rising from her jacket. "He's still trying to grow a leg!"

The leader's grin faded then. She flexed the fingers of both hands and slipped the knife from its sheath. She raised it.

A rider directly behind her giggled, and made some gesture I couldn't see.

I stepped back, and every rider was suddenly laughing.

The leader was using the knife to pick at her teeth.

Her smile came on again, and her voice was like sandpaper.

"Where's your pass?"

My throat was tight when I answered.

"I—I'm sorry, but—What kind of pass should I—"

Everyone was laughing again. The leader threw her head back in mock pride and made strutting motions on her bike.

"I just got back from Cam," I tried, "and I haven't—"

The laughter had stopped.

A soft "Ohhhhhh"—both mocking and serious—was coming from two or three of the riders.

The leader was shaking her head slowly.

With her chin she pointed over my shoulder, and this time her voice was hard.

"Your eyes screwed-up, too, gimp-boy? We got a sign up for your kind."

"If he ain't blind," one of the riders began—but the leader cut her off with a flash of the knife blade.

I started talking quickly, trying everything I could think of.

"I haven't been in Emerald Hills for four years. I used to live here—up on Jasper Lane. I like the area here. I'm planning to apply for a job at Henry's station. My parents lived here until last year. My mother's up in Salinas now—she's a member of the Salinas—"

I stopped because the leader had twisted around and was mumbling a question to the others—something about Henry's station.

"Jack's," someone answered behind her.

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"Jack's," the leader repeated.

When she turned back to me, she was laughing hard.

"Whooeeee!" She slipped the knife back in its sheath. "You go right ahead and apply for that there position at the *service* station. Only it ain't Henry's place any more—it's dear ole Jack's."

She was turning her chopper now, nosing it out into the street, mashing through the litter, giving me a good look at the back of her leather jacket.

In red and white were the two "rockers"—WOMEN'S LEAGUE at the top, EMERALD HILLS CHAPTER at the bottom. In the middle, the glaring death's-head insignia.

I could see it clearly. Not "crossbones" under the skull, but instead a thin-lined cross, the top of it connected to the skull's chin.

A dozen small patches dotted the jacket, too—all the same kind. I couldn't tell for sure, but the picture on the patch looked like a frankfurter broken in two with a row of teeth above it and below it.

All backs were to me now—skulls glaring. Chrome was gleaming everywhere. Every bike was being slapped into gear.

The leader turned, let the grin spread, and shouted at me over the roar of engines.

"You can be sure Jack'll have some use for you!"

Laughter rose above the roar, and the gang wheeled away.

I stood and stared.

Down the boulevard the leader turned her throttle to a full twist, and her pipes backed off in a thunder.

A block off the boulevard, I cut through a clump of bushes and in a few steps was on the asphalt of the station.

At first I couldn't see the difference. It was still a four-pump unit, old-style Chevron, the first station built after the subdivision.

Then I noticed the colors. Something was wrong—blue was missing. Everything had been repainted in either red or white.

Over the office door were the red letters JACK'S CHEVRON. They looked newly painted.

But someone was repainting them anyway.

I squinted, staring at the massive figure, its back to me on the ladder. Red plaid Pendleton, levis that had once been blue, rough-out boots, a green baseball cap, and the body build of a bull.

It was a long-sleeve Pendleton—the lumberjack type—and the sleeves weren't rolled up. I itched and sweated just thinking about it.

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Smoke was billowing from the figure's head.

I started forward, but stopped when I noticed all the choppers that were in different stages of disassembly inside the station's shed.

I would have left then—and should have—but the figure on the ladder turned, saw me, grunted, and placed hand on hip. Another cloud of cigar smoke floated up past the baseball cap.

"Jack?" I called out—a little weakly.

The figure nodded.

I stepped forward, feeling awkward for reasons other than my leg.

The distance stretched forever. The figure dropped the brush into the paint can at the top of the ladder, and a heavy ring glinted in the sunlight.

Another grunt, and another billowing of smoke.

When I reached the ladder, I looked up and stared. The smoke had cleared, and globs of red paint were glistening on the front of the Pendleton.

Looking at the front of the shirt, I froze. My leg began tingling, and the other knee joint felt weak, and a vision of all the choppers in the shed flashed through my head.

"Never seen tits before?" Jack croaked. Her voice had the hoarseness of someone who has been gassed in a riot or war.

My eyes snapped up to her face, and I tried not to frown from the sunlight. A small scar wrinkled one of her eyebrows. Her other eye had a milky spot on it. The stogie drooped from the corner of her mouth, held by her big lips. The baseball cap had a big gold A on it.

"Yeah?" she said, blowing smoke down at me.

"I was wondering. . . ."

She had leaned back against the ladder. It was trembling dangerously. She took the stogie from her mouth and flicked a long ash down at me.

"You on foot?"

"Yes, I am. I was just wondering—"

"You sneak past Organ Morgan and the boys?"

The name flashed familiar. It wasn't easy to forget.

"Not really," I said. "They let me through when I told them—"

Jack's body seemed to stiffen. I waited.

"You got passage—how, boy?"

"I told them I was on my way here to ask about a job."

She didn't say anything for a minute.

"You're lying."

"Not exactly," I mumbled, and tried a smile. "The last time I was here Henry Blackburn owned the station, and I worked for him two summers. I've been away a few years."

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"Sure have." She started down the ladder then, huffing and puffing, smoke billowing.

"What they tell you?" she asked halfway down.

"Who? Oh. . . ." I started to feel confident. "They said you'd probably have a use for me."

She stopped suddenly on the ladder, looked a little confused, and then swore.

"You'll be lucky, Mac," she said, continuing down, "if my use ain't the same as theirs'd be."

My leg began tingling again, but I kept myself from taking a step back—especially when she reached the last rung.

"You get that limp from a rock?" she demanded, surprising me.

"No, sir," I answered quickly, then stuttered in panic.

But the "sir" hadn't bothered her at all. In fact, I think she liked it.

"It's my leg," I went on. "It isn't a bad limp, really. I can do anything—"

She was on the asphalt now. She probably outweighed me by fifty pounds, but she was only five ten or so. She was having to look up at me. . . .

I watched something change in her face. The muscles at her temples started slipping back and forth. She was grinding her teeth. She was puffing rapidly on her stogie.

She spun around and headed toward the shed, her boots striking the pavement loudly. I followed in confusion, staring at her broad back, feeling sure that getting out of Emerald Hills on foot would simply not be possible.

"That Limey Triumph," she croaked, gesturing roughly at one of the bikes inside. "It's got wiring trouble. Shoot it."

I didn't like the sound of her voice at all—and the sensation in my leg showed it.

Without even glancing at me, she spun around again and went over to a crate of canned oil. Hoisting it with ease, she carried it around in back of the station.

I knelt by the Triumph, and found it hard to concentrate.

I was just beginning to size up the wiring system, when I heard Jack's bootsteps on the other side of the bike. I didn't let myself look up, but I wasn't really looking at the wires either.

Her steps came closer.

Just when my eyes snapped up to look at her, the empty crate she was carrying struck the bike hard. The Triumph started to fall.

I jumped back, but the handlebar caught me in the stomach, pinning me for a second.

There was going to be a bruise the size of a silver

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dollar—but I didn't let my hands go to the spot.

She was looking down at me, stogie drooping, smoke swirling up past her milky eye.

An accidental jolt from the empty crate wouldn't have been strong enough to overturn the bike.

And Jack knew I knew it.

"Listen, Mac," she boomed suddenly. "You keep that up with my bikes, and we'll see if Organ and company can find a better use for you!"

I could only stare. It didn't make sense. She knew I knew. What did she want from me?

When I finished on the Triumph, she had me get to work on a chopper that belonged to someone named Bloody Babs. A monster bike with gigantic special-made heads and dual Dureto carburetors.

Jack wouldn't tell me what was wrong with it.

I bent over to familiarize myself with the bike, and tried to think. Every time Jack's bootsteps came anywhere near me, I let my eyes glance up to check her.

I'm sure she knew I was checking her. She kept brushing by the bike, going out of her way to pass close to it.

Before long I was tinkering with the carburetors and had forgotten her for a moment.

I stood up to stretch my legs and heard a bike being rolled up behind me.

The bike hit me low. Something else hit me high. I went flying into the Bloody Babs bike, and the twisted Moose seat struck me in the crotch as I knocked the bike over, falling across it.

This time I couldn't keep my hands from the bruised spot. Hands still there, I got to my feet in time to hear Jack say:

"What could be hurtin', Mac? You don't have anything there to hold."

Sick pain was shooting through my groin, reaching up through my stomach. I wasn't thinking clearly at all.

I stepped toward her, swung hard, and pain shot through my arm as I missed. Her head had dodged to the side like a boxer's—like a mongoose's.

I wasn't free to swing again. Her arms were around me, pinning mine. Her stogie was dancing in my eyes, blinding me with smoke. She was crushing my chest, and what air did get through had the overpowering smell of oil, paint, cigars, ammonia, and a high school gym all mixed together.

She lifted me easily somehow. I think I whimpered.

I had my head thrown back to keep my face away from the stogie, so I was off balance, my struggling clumsy.

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I tried kicking. I kept it up, but her shins were like iron.

She lifted me higher, and then tipped me a few degrees to one side.

Then she let go.

Nothing broke, but every finger on my right hand felt impacted.

She was looking down at me again. I think she was smiling, but I couldn't tell for sure. Her lips were busy moving the stogie from one corner of her mouth to the other.

"Don't worry about the hog," she said finally, and for a moment the hardness was out of her voice. "We'll tell Bloody Babs it was me that scratched it up."

She started to walk away, but then turned back.

"Hey, Mac. It's a wiring problem. . . ."

I went back to work on the chopper. I was beginning to understand.

It had all been a ceremony. And the ceremony was over.

She now knew that I knew she was the better man.

I fixed the Bloody Babs bike and went to take a leak.

I passed the "women's," glanced back at the door, and stopped. Over WOMEN someone had nailed one of the teeth-and-frankfurter patches.

And under the patch were more words in red spray paint.

OSCAR MEYER FREEZER
SAVE UNTIL SATURDAY

I looked around to check and then stepped to the door. But I didn't try the doorknob—a strong whiff of clogged toilet from inside stopped me.

The "men's" wasn't spotless, but the toilets were at least working. I stood at the urinal, stared at the pipes, and almost managed to relax—

The door flew open and Jack walked in.

Once you start, it's hard to stop. But I tried. I turned to look at her once, then turned back, my hands trying to hide that part of me which was suddenly cold.

Jack wasn't interested. With a blank look she went immediately to the sink, rolled up her sleeves and started washing her hands—which were dripping with oil.

I watched her from the corner of my eye, staring until my eyes ached.

I had expected her arms to be covered with E9 needle marks, but I couldn't see any at all.

What I could see were tattoos. Her arms were covered with them.

A dragon, a flag, a skull, a banner—but I wasn't paying any attention to those. My eyes were glued on just one tattoo.

A name in black. . .two words. . .the first word covered

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over with a sloppy rectangle of slightly lighter ink.

The second word was "Jack".

I would have been able to read the first word if Jack hadn't suddenly rolled her sleeves down, not bothering to dry her hands.

I zipped up my pants and waited for the door to close before I turned around.

The door caught my eye, and I stared. The back of a black leather jacket was facing me.

The skull-and-cross. The rockers WOMEN'S LEAGUE and EMERALD HILLS CHAPTER. But also some differences.

There were marks where a lot of small patches had been ripped off.

And under the skull-and-cross, over to one side of the jacket, was the word "Jack."

A vision of the first word on Jack's arm, the word covered over with ink, flashed through my head. I stepped quickly to the door and straightened the jacket to remove the folds.

In front of "Jack" was a gaping hole. There had once been a word there, but either a knife or scissors had taken it out.

I managed to work on another Harley CH before Jack announced lunchtime.

"If that market on Tourmaline is still there," I said, "I'll make a trip for us. If you want."

Jack puffed on her cigar, stared, and started shaking her head slowly. The look she was giving me made me feel like a two-year-old.

She took the Triumph and was back in fifteen minutes with a dozen prewrapped sandwiches of all kinds.

I stuffed my two down quickly, then sat on the shed's oily cement in silence. Jack remained standing, squinting out at the sunny sky and downing each sandwich in a bite or two.

When she finally looked down at me, she was shaking her head again. Then she pulled the bill of her cap down and crouched beside me.

"Those guys you met this morning—they're a good tough bunch."

I nodded, and started playing with one of the cellophane sandwich wrappers. I was nervous and uncomfortable as hell.

She reached over, grabbed the wrapper from me, wadded it up, tossed it away, and went on talking.

"They're as rough as any chapter in the South *or* the North."

She hesitated for a second.

And then suddenly she was telling me all about them.

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She sounded proud—but I really couldn't be sure what was going on in her head. For some reason I kept getting the feeling that she was telling me all these things for my own good.

She told me about Organ Morgan, sometimes called Organ La Fay, about all her Oscar Meyer patches, and how they were the reason for her name.

About Big Bertha, the black one, who carried a Browning automatic and had thirty-five others cached somewhere in Emerald Hills.

About Hurricane George, who got her tag because of her proficiency with a certain unmentionable act, which Jack mentioned to me in full detail until I was swallowing hard.

About Old Gloria and her stars-and-stripes, which you'd never be able to see completely unless you tore the shirt off her front, and the chances of your being able to do that were mighty slim.

About Fransissie, the fat one with the fancy "sissie seat." Tugboat Annie, the funny one with the stovepipe hat and cane. "Hands" Hanna, the smooth one with the missing fingers. Velvet Vickie, the cream-skinned handsome dresser. Screaming Mimi with her gleaming machetes. Tarzana Jane, the one who wore a T-shirt and greased her muscles. Queen Elizabeth, who used soda pop for strange purposes. And finally Bloody Babs, who was always in hard competition with Organ Morgan for the most Oscar Meyer patches.

Jack told me about the husbands. Every rider once had a husband, and Jack's stories about them were of two kinds. Either strange deaths that didn't seem connected with the Emerald Hills gang at all, or fancy escapes from their homes in Emerald Hills—never to be seen again.

She started to tell me about the "women's" room, and the Oscar Meyer patches, and what actually happened every Saturday when the gang went on a "run"—but suddenly she stopped.

The look on her face made me feel like I had been trying to force the information out of her.

She got up quickly and stalked away.

She never did say a word about herself.

That evening I tried to look busy. I didn't know where I was going to sleep, let alone how I was going to get there, past the gang, in one piece.

A familiar roar made me turn from the bike I was working on.

As the gang rolled up, engines dying, I started matching names with faces, bodies

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and gear. Old Gloria behind Organ Morgan, Big Bertha hidden in shadows to the right, next to Fransissie and Velvet Vickie. Tarzana Jane to the left, her grease shining, along with Queen Elizabeth, and the familiar head with the stovepipe hat. Behind them were four others I couldn't see clearly.

Suddenly there was a commotion on Organ's bike. Someone was sitting behind her, hidden from view.

"Papa, papa, papa!" Tarzana Jane began shouting, waving a rifle and pretending to bite the end of its barrel.

It was a man.

"Papa come-uh creepin' uh-round," Velvet Vickie chanted, "uh-round, uh-round."

He was bigger than Organ Morgan, but that didn't seem to matter. She slipped off the bike, grabbed him by the arm, and tore him off. The bike wobbled but stayed upright.

The man crumpled to the asphalt in a heap. The station lights glinted off the blood that was smeared all over his clothes.

"Where?" Jack grunted, now a few feet to my right.

"Oh, around," Tugboat Annie hooted, grabbing the rifle from Tarzana.

"Gem Crest," Organ announced—proud.

Jack walked to the man and stood over him. He was propped up on one arm, wiping a bloody lip. She started nudging him with her foot, trying to turn him over, and then suddenly kicked his arm out from under him.

The man rolled over on his back and lay glaring up at her.

She kept nudging him, teasing him with her boot.

Some sound made me turn, and I found Organ beside me, smiling her gap-tooth look again. She elbowed me, grinned wider, and I stepped away from her as casually as I could.

She turned then and shouted at Jack.

"Say, Jack-o! You savin' this child for your own *private* picnic?"

A couple of the riders laughed, and the word "private" started echoing among the others.

The stare Jack gave Organ was a long one. I think a smile appeared on Jack's lips—but again I couldn't tell for sure, with her lips moving the stogie back and forth across her mouth.

The laughter faded away. The gang seemed to grow uncomfortable.

A voice said, "Cool it, La Fay!" and someone started whistling—the kind a kid does in the dark.

Finally Jack spoke.

"Don't I have the right?" She didn't mean it as a question.

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"Oh, yeah," Organ answered quickly.

When Jack went back to prodding the man with her boot, Organ started whispering in my ear.

"If I ever catch you away from this place—if I ever catch you alone. . . ."

Quickly she reached around with one arm and pulled the back of her jacket around so I could see all her Oscar Meyer patches.

I stared at them, and heard bootsteps coming close.

By the time I looked up and saw Jack stalking toward us, Organ was trotting off to her chopper, laughing, pretending nothing had happened.

All engines were being revved. Someone shouted, "We shall *overcome!*" and two or three of the riders laughed. Bloody Babs, who had certain gestures that reminded me of Organ Morgan's, shouted, "Ripe for Saturday!"

As if on cue, all the riders whistled the Oscar Meyer whistle, raised their arms and brought them down karate style toward their crotches.

Then they were wheeling away, guffawing, someone still waving the man's rifle.

I turned to find Jack staring at me.

"Mac," she said, smoke billowing, "it's quitting time."

I took a deep breath.

"I don't have—" I began, then started over. "I haven't had a chance to find a place to bed down tonight."

She flipped her stogie to the asphalt and swore, grinding the stogie out violently.

"Then take a walk!"

I glanced over at the man on the ground. He had heard it and was looking as amazed as I felt.

When I reached the bushes, I looked back to make sure neither he nor Jack was watching me. Then I ducked into the bushes.

From where I squatted the station lights gave everything a metallic look. I could see that Jack was lighting up another cigar, her back still to the big man. The man was starting to get up slowly.

Paying no attention to him, Jack went over to the pumps that were closest to me and started gathering up oil cans. The man was on his feet now.

He started toward her quietly, and I almost shouted. But I caught myself.

There was something strangely familiar about what was happening.

The man's hands were locked together and raised high over her neck when Jack suddenly turned on him.

There was a flurry of arms, and then I could see that Jack's arms were around the man, pinning his just like she had

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pinned mine. Her stogie was dancing in his face, and he had his head thrown back—which put him off balance just like it had done to me.

He was a good four inches taller than Jack, and he might have outweighed her. But her arms were as long as an ape's, as thick as thighs. She lifted him easily and tipped him a few degrees to one side.

She didn't drop him. She threw him.

Slowly he tried to raise himself up on one arm. The arm buckled. He was moaning.

The little ceremony had happened again. Again it had worked.

I realized then that it had probably worked a hundred times before.

Jack shouted something at the man, and he struggled up, using his other arm.

She turned him around and started pushing him toward the corner of the station. While they walked, she pulled a ring of keys from her levis. Soon they had disappeared around in back.

I waited, listening for the sound of a beating, or a gunshot, or anything.

The only sound was the breeze. Not even any distant sounds of cars or bikes.

A minute or two later Jack appeared alone.

I stayed in the bushes for another ten minutes, again trying to imagine a way of getting out of Emerald Hills safely. But nothing came. All my head did was give me flashes of Organ Morgan and her whispered threat.

When I finally got up to leave the bushes, blood rushed through my legs and made my head swim. I stumbled out toward the lights of the station.

Jack was waiting for me—hands on hips, trunk-like legs apart, stogie drooping.

"Can you hack one blanket?" she said, gesturing with her thumb toward the shed behind her.

"Sure. No problem." I felt tired and eager.

Her stogie went erect.

"I'm the one that decides what problems there are, Mac!"

I nodded and headed toward the shed, trying not to run.

The blanket must have had the equivalent of two quarts of oil in it. It was something you slept *on*, never under—just like every blanket in Cam.

I shuffled around for a couple of minutes, trying to decide where to lie down, and getting nervous—afraid that Jack would appear in the shed at any moment.

I finally smoothed the blanket down half under the tool bench and half out. I lay down facing the darkness.

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In less than a minute the skin on my back was crawling and my leg was tingling. I turned over and faced the light—the entrance to the shed.

Somehow I fell asleep, and the sound of hard bootsteps woke me up.

It was still night outside, and I closed my eyes quickly, trying to look asleep. I lay there listening.

A shuffling sound, a grunt, a sigh, and then close by the sound of cloth rasping against cement. When the sounds stopped, I opened my eyes slowly.

Jack was no more than six feet away. I could see her broad plaid back through the frame of the Limey Triumph. She was slumped against it.

I woke again sometime later to a dream of Organ Morgan gunning her chopper near me. I opened my eyes and it wasn't a chopper at all.

Jack's snoring didn't bother me the rest of the night.

Saturday morning they came to get him.

Screaming Mimi raised herself up stiff-legged on her bike, and clanged two machetes over her head.

"It's gonna be a long run!" she shouted.

"Hell!" someone answered. "Beware, you brother-muckers!"

Jack brought the man out of the "women's" and pushed him toward Organ Morgan, who was polishing her jacket buttons with her leather cuff.

The top of Old Gloria's shirt was unbuttoned, and I could see a few stars on one breast and most of a red stripe on the other.

Queen Elizabeth, her chartreuse shirt shining in the sunlight, was humming loudly. She pulled what looked like a .38 special from a trim shoulder holster under her jacket and spun the chamber.

Organ Morgan grabbed the man and jerked him roughly up onto the seat behind her. The man slumped, never looking up.

Suddenly Tugboat Annie raised up on her bike, tossed her hat in the air, ducked low, and caught it on her head.

"Hey, god-of-a-leader!" she shouted.

Jack turned slowly.

Organ Morgan snapped around, instantly nervous, watching Jack closely.

My head echoed "leader." My leg started tingling again, and all I could do was stare at Jack like the others were doing.

Jack grunted, flicked a long ash, and darted her eyes once toward Organ Morgan.

"Run with us, hey," Tugboat Annie shouted. "It's been a long time comin'. You were damn good then."

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All of the riders except one fell into it.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Big Bertha said, the sun glinting off the BAR that was propped up in her crotch.

"You still got Oscar-class for ten!" someone shouted—maybe Hurricane George.

"A good run'll jack you up good—"

"For a week, a week!"

"Yeah, yeah, ho!"

My eyes were back on Organ Morgan now. She was glaring hard, moving her head from side to side slowly, nostrils flaring.

And when I turned to look at Jack again, I saw it all clearly. I understood it all completely.

She was a tower of strength, a rock of "class." Her boots were hooves. Her levis, unwashed since the day she got them, were like a tough weathered hide. Her legs were those of a buffalo. Her chest bulged out like a truck's cab. Her arms were like swollen pistons, and her long-sleeve Pendleton was like steel wool. And her belt—

For the first time I noticed her belt buckle. The chopper it pictured stuck out like a snarled gold nugget.

She was a god. From the waist down she was a bull; from the waist up, a man. A god of a leader. She no longer rode with her chapter—she no longer led it. But she was still what she had always been.

And Organ Morgan knew it.

Smoke rose in a cloud over Jack's head. She spoke.

"My iron's hurtin'."

"Aw, Jack," Tugboat whined. "There's a mount for you around here somewhere. You can—"

"She says her iron's hurtin'," Organ Morgan interrupted then, flicking her engine on at the same time.

Over the sound of Organ Morgan's bike Tugboat Annie again shouted at Jack, waving at her.

"Up Oakland way, they say you always cured hurtin' hogs by riding them hard!"

Organ Morgan swore, spun her bike around, and almost lost the man behind her. As she started away, the others turned their choppers too—but their gazes hung on Jack for a long time.

Jack shook her head. That ended it.

But I'm sure she was liking Tugboat's words. At least I *think* there was a smile behind the stogie smoke and her moving lips.

A couple of minutes after the gang left, Jack appeared with a whiskey bottle.

All day I could see her taking gulps from it.

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And when I went to my blanket that night, my foot hit something, but the blanket kept the glass from breaking.

I fell asleep with the whiskey fumes making me woozy, and there were a lot of dreams that night.

They brought two "papas" in the next week—the first one on Tuesday. I "took a walk," hid in the bushes again, and watched. Jack let the man attack her, then bear-hugged him, and threw him down.

She didn't put him in the "women's" right away. Instead, she went over to the shed to handle something, and left him lying there on the pavement.

I wanted to talk to him. I sneaked over to him, crouched down, and tried to tell him that I didn't understand—anything.

"Where've you been?" he said, but then didn't let me answer.

"The only place you could've been," he said. "They should get the word over there better than they do."

Soon I had him telling me about his wife, about how he had gotten sick and tired of supporting her—her bike, her E9, her arrogance, her appetite, her perversions. About how he, like thousands of husbands each day, had found himself a weapon and gone nomad, traveling solo from tract to tract in the southland, stealing only from those houses where Women's Leaguers lived. Always solo, never in gangs—because a League Chapter was always meaner and better organized than any gang of "rebel hubs" ever could be. The police never did anything. The courts never did anything. No one ever foreclosed. "Politoscare" was everywhere.

When he finished talking, the man lay there on the ground panting. I think his leg was broken, but he wasn't doing any moaning.

I thanked him and got up to leave. His eyes narrowed. A suspicious look came across his face.

I started to shuffle away, and he called me back.

I crouched down next to him, thinking he was going to offer some advice, or more information, or pass on a survival trick.

"Hey," the man whispered, "what's your thing here?"

I'm sure he had already guessed. He was working his jaw, and I could hear saliva squeak in his mouth.

"I work here," I said.

He looked over once at Jack, who was still tinkering with something in the shed, and then back at me. His lips were moving into a sneer.

"You muckin' fool!" he whispered.

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He hit me in the face with about a tablespoon of spit.

I don't see how she could have heard, but Jack was suddenly walking toward us. When I got up and stepped away—leg tingling, saliva streaming down my face—Jack bent down and cuffed the man hard, cracking a couple of his teeth.

It was noon of the next Wednesday. Jack had taken the Limey to get us food.

I was working on the kick starter of a CH—Tarzana Jane's "second"—when I heard the gang approach.

Even before I turned, I knew why they had come. My whole backbone was suddenly tingling.

I stared at Organ Morgan and at the tussled figure sitting behind her, and I swallowed hard.

Organ looked around slowly, her smile growing. Finally she looked back at me.

"Jack trusts you? Oh, wow, baby!"

Not a muscle in my body moved.

The others didn't say anything. They were waiting, uneasy. And the only one looking at me was Tugboat Annie. I couldn't be sure, but I think a half friendly smile flickered across her pockmarked face.

Organ reached around and yanked the man off the bike. He caught his balance, and danced a few steps away when Organ tried to shove him and knock him down.

Organ twisted around again and grunted something at Tarzana Jane.

Tarzana grunted back, shaking her head.

Organ grunted again in anger, and Tarzana handed the man's rifle over to her. With her back to me, Organ did something with the weapon.

Organ raised the rifle high. I again swallowed hard.

"You'll need this!" she shouted, flinging the rifle at me. It hit me in the shoulder, and I fumbled, but then caught it.

"And this!" she shouted, slipping a key from her pocket and tossing it at me. I hurt my finger catching it.

I tried to hold the rifle casually, but every position I tried felt stiff, unnatural. All my time with rifles in Cam didn't help at all.

The man was staring at me. He was a couple of inches shorter, but he was muscular as hell—thirty or forty pounds more muscular. He looked a lot like a sergeant I'd once had—the only sergeant I had ever really liked.

I made a couple of weak gestures with the rifle, and he took his time turning around. I

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mumbled "Move!" two or three times, and finally was leading him toward the back of the station—the first prisoner I'd ever handled.

All the choppers had come to life by now, rolling toward the street.

Organ was the last to leave the station's asphalt, and I noticed two new Oscar Meyer patches on the back of her jacket.

Suddenly she grinned at me—the same dark grin.

"It ain't loaded no more, baby!" she shouted.

Time froze for me. My muscles wouldn't obey me. The man in front of me was turning in slow-motion, biceps flexing, neck straining around.

Then my muscles snapped free. My arms moved, my hands flipped the rifle around so that I was holding the cold barrel. I hit the man hard on the temple with the rifle butt.

He dropped like a rag.

I panicked. My mouth was open. My own saliva was wetting my chin.

I crouched down, stood up, and crouched down again. I touched the man's head, the blood there, then grabbed his wrist, but couldn't tell anything because my own blood was thundering through my body, blocking out any other sound or feeling.

The next thing I knew, I was dragging him by the arms toward the "women's." At the door I let his arms fall. They slapped against the cement. Frantically I dug through my pants pocket for the key, finding it finally in my shirt pocket.

Once inside, I bent over him, heard him groan once, and tried to hold my breath. But the stench of the clogged toilet burned my nose anyway. I had blood on my hands.

I kept telling myself that he was alive, alive, alive. It didn't help.

I turned and made a dash, but wasn't even through the doorway when I threw up.

I stared at the puke, and a new scare ran through me. I didn't want Jack to see the puke. I didn't want her to know it was mine.

A cough made me look up.

Jack was at the corner of the building—cigar in hand, bag of groceries crushed in her arms—looking at me.

The silence was filled with the blood rushing through my head.

When she finally spoke, her voice was almost soft in its hoarseness.

"You jacked him up so hard he puked, huh? That's class, Mac."

One hand went slowly to her forehead. She gave me a small salute. And she may have been

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smiling a little, but I couldn't be sure.

I do know one thing. She had been standing there a long time.

Long enough to know whose puke it was.

It was a Monday two weeks later. I was working on Jack's old bike—the one with the small Bates seat—when the gang roared up.

Organ didn't even have to jerk the man off her bike. She stopped and he fell off. Organ sneered. The man just lay there in a heap.

He was as tall as me, but he was weak, and he looked sick and underfed. He was covered with cuts and bruises—some old, some fresh.

"What a man," Organ announced, still sneering. "No weapon."

"Poor Oscar can't fight!" Tarzana chimed in.

"Where?" Jack demanded, and Bloody Babs answered, "Diamond Heights."

Everyone laughed. I smiled. Diamond Heights homes were the most expensive ones in all of Emerald Hills.

Oscar wasn't his name; it was just another word for "League Papa." But it stuck in my mind. Somehow it fit.

When the gang left, I didn't even wait for Jack to give me a signal. I "took a walk."

From the bushes I watched the little ceremony start again.

Jack was fiddling with oil cans about sixty feet from the guy, her back to him.

He started crawling, but only went a few feet—to the curb by the office door. He never looked up.

Jack jerked around once at the sound of his crawling, but then went back to her act with the cans.

Finally the man looked up. He squinted, began staring into the bright sky, and still didn't move.

I could tell that Jack was getting impatient. She stood up and walked to the other side of the station, stopping just around the corner. I could see her, but the man couldn't. She was listening.

The man got slowly to his feet, and Jack heard him.

She rushed around the corner and charged him.

He hadn't stepped an inch away from his spot. Still squinting into the sunlight, he was only stretching his back. He seemed unaware of everything.

Her bull body hit him hard, but he couldn't fall. Her arms were instantly around him, squeezing. Her stogie was dancing dangerously close to his face, but he didn't seem to notice. His head wasn't thrown back at all. He wasn't struggling at all.

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He was completely limp in her arms, and she felt it.

She bellowed through clenched teeth and stogie, and squeezed even harder—hard enough to break a rib or two.

Still he wouldn't fight her.

The tip of the stogie was almost in his eye now, and she suddenly seemed aware of it. Her face reddened, and I think she was trembling a little. Some of his blood—from his dozens of cuts—was getting on her Pendleton.

The stogie touched his eye. Nothing happened. Maybe a twitch of his head and neck—but nothing else.

She froze. The stogie fell from her teeth. dropped between her bulging chest and his sunken front.

The only sound that reached me then was a groan, and I don't think it was from Oscar's lips.

Her whole body was shaking. She let go, and he fell.

He didn't move. She didn't move. Her stogie lay burning by her boot.

Then she bent down and shook him. He still didn't move, and she shook him harder. Even from where I was, I could tell he was unconscious.

Finally she reached down and picked him up like he weighed nothing. Carrying him in her arms, she headed toward the back of the station.

When she came back, I think she was still shaking. She seemed to stand there in a daze, almost facing me, and I watched her hands. They were trying to brush something from the front of her Pendleton.

At first I thought it was ashes, but she kept brushing and brushing.

Before long, I realized that with each stroke her hands were getting redder—redder and wetter, glistening in the sunlight.

The next day I found Jack listening by the "women's" door. Retching and fits of coughing were going on inside the room.

When she saw me, she faced the door quickly and started shouting.

"Cool it! You hear me? Anything you puke, you eat!"

The day after was Wednesday, and the deep coughing sounds greeted me when I went to take a leak right after waking up.

Later that morning the coughing suddenly stopped. I was in the shed and had been hearing it through the walls.

I went outside to look around and wasn't surprised when I couldn't find Jack anywhere.

I peered around the corner of the building and noticed that the "women's" door was open.

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I could hear muffled voices coming from the room and could recognize Jack's grunts from time to time. The other voice was soft, much harder to hear.

As I started to leave, Jack's voice suddenly reached me clearly.

"Yeah. Those Sierras are heavy sights."

At noon the next day, Jack let Oscar come out. She let him stand on the curb by the office and stare out at the sky. Why he wanted to stand instead of sit, I don't know—he still looked like walking death.

He had been standing there only five minutes when I heard choppers approaching in the distance.

I pivoted quickly, and found Jack listening hard to the sound. She looked frozen.

By the time Organ came in sight, Jack had reached Oscar at a furious charge, knocking him down hard, hitting him once in the chest with her fist, and starting to shout at him.

She shouted something about caving his head in if he ever tried to escape again.

The gang passed without stopping. But Organ's eyes stayed on the three of us until she was out of sight.

Without a word Jack led Oscar back to the "women's."

I stood there scared. I felt sure I had seen something I shouldn't have—that my seeing it made me some threat to Jack. . . .

I thought again about leaving. But visions of Organ Morgan, the Emerald Hills gang, and the dozens of smaller and lesser gangs that patrolled the Emerald Hills area made staying at the station once again seem the better of two bad scenes.

When Jack returned, I waited for her to say something, or do something.

Nothing happened. She acted like she didn't know I existed.

The next day was Friday. From the minute we both woke up in the shed, I could sense that something was different.

She smoked twice as many cigars and missed quite a few with her boot when she tried to grind them out. And she was constantly squinting up at the sky.

I even found her sitting on the curb by the office once. She stood up quickly as soon as she saw me staring at her, but then a few minutes later she was back sitting on the curb again.

I had never seen her sitting down before—not even for a second.

When the gang arrived the next morning, the difference in Jack seemed to disappear.

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She didn't bother to look up. She just kept tinkering with the throttle of her old bike.

Organ Morgan geared down, tires screeching, and rolled toward us.

"Ain't papa up yet?" she shouted, as the rest of the gang rolled in beside her.

Hurricane George began singing in a monotone.

"He'll dig it—he'll dig it—he will dig it!"

When Jack finally turned around, it was like she didn't know what they were talking about. She stood up, looked a little annoyed, and knocked the ash from her stogie.

"Are you ribbin'?" she said. "That's no papa in there. Anyone gets a patch off of him, wouldn't've earned it. A no-class rip-off."

The gang stared at her for a minute, and then at Organ.

Organ's eyes were slits, suspicious, running up and down Jack's body.

"Papa needs fattening up," Jack went on, paying no attention to Organ's look. "We'll stuff him with a week's fill of hotdogs."

Two or three riders laughed at the joke.

Jack was smiling a strange smile now, and the smile was working.

"A week?" someone whined, but only half serious. "Aw, Jack Sprat!"

Organ cracked her knuckles.

"No week," she announced. "Tuesday's a national fest day, and we're running.'

"Okay!" Tarzana cried. "Okay, fest gay!"

Tugboat shushed her with a signal, and the entire gang fell silent.

Organ was starting to turn her bike around. She stopped and looked back.

"He'd get fat, Jack," she said softly, witch-cackle style, "if you didn't punish him so bad. Monday was heavy, no?"

So she had guessed the truth about Monday? I couldn't tell, and I don't think Jack could either.

Jack said nothing—and that was the right answer.

"Organ, hey," Old Gloria called suddenly. "Who's our papa for today?"

It was Tugboat who answered, as she nosed her chopper toward the street and waved for some of the others to follow.

"We hunt one down now," she said.

Organ stared at Jack, and then roared off with the rest of them, soon back in lead.

When they came on Tuesday, Jack acted casual again.

"Go ahead and take him," she croaked, wearing her odd smile again, "if you want a sick patch for your rumbler."

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Some murmuring began behind Organ Morgan.

"Wait until the next run," Jack went on, "and you'll have a glory-class, good-shag patch."

Tugboat laughed nervously, and picked it up.

"Verily a patch to possess, boys—one glory-class good-shag patch of patches. Yeah, yeah!"

Organ wasn't listening. She raised up stiff-legged on her bike, crossed her arms, and glared.

"Oh, Jack!" she shouted, and her tone was a command.

Jack seemed to stiffen.

"I don't suppose," Organ went on slowly, sarcasm growing, "that this is a crooked rundown you're dealing us."

Jack glared back for a second, spun on her heels, and stalked away toward the back of the station.

I thought she was giving up, that she was going to get Oscar.

But Velvet Vickie mumbled something about Jack's jacket.

"Foah shoah," Queen Elizabeth agreed. "She gone to get it."

Organ's jaw dropped slightly. She started fidgeting.

"Dark meaning," Big Bertha announced—to make things worse.

"Hell!" Organ said. "We don't need her skinny pig. We found us a good patch last Saturday, last-minute-wise, and—"

"We'll hunt down another one today!" Tugboat finished for her.

The gang relaxed.

Then Organ raised up on her bike even higher, and spit tokenly at my feet.

"Listen, baby. You tell Jack we're coming for our papa Saturday next. And she better not have any private ideas on him. We don't plan on having him missing anything when we take him running. Tell Jack-o she either joins us, or keeps hands-off our papas' fruit!"

I didn't tell Jack any such thing. I got back to work on the bikes and stayed with them until blanket time.

It took me by surprise—completely—and I should have been able to predict it.

It was the next Friday night. Jack had gone to test her old bike on the boulevard—the first time I had ever seen her do anything like this.

The gang roared up, and I just stood there mouth open while Organ leaped off her chopper, Queen Elizabeth's .38 special in her hand, and rushed around in back of the station.

I followed, but kept at a safe distance, and heard two shots before I rounded the corner.

The lock had been shot off the door. Oscar was screaming faintly inside.

Organ pulled him out where

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everyone could see, knocked him to the asphalt, and stepped on his hand. He was looking as pale and sick as ever.

Organ started whispering to him, witch-style again, prodding him with her boot, and suddenly unsheathing her knife.

"You grow any yet?" she said, jabbing the knife at his crotch. He tried to roll away, but she grabbed him. His eyes went wide.

A sound made everyone freeze. A bike sound.

I turned in time to see Jack coming on fast.

I stepped to one side, and that gave her a view of Organ leaning over Oscar with the knife.

I stepped even further to the side, because Jack was off her bike, was running beside it, huffing and puffing like a train, guiding the bike in, face red.

She let go and the bike hit Organ. It twisted her leg, sent her sprawling on the asphalt next to Oscar.

Organ looked up, knife still in hand, and quickly rolled over the few feet that separated her from Oscar. Straightening up on one elbow, she jabbed with the knife.

It sank into flesh, passing next to his zipper, and he screamed loudly this time, making it hard to hear Organ—who was screaming at Jack now.

"You've done it now! You've shown us *nothin'*!"

Jack had already bellowed once when the knife sank in. Now she bellowed again, and it was louder than any bull.

When she reached Organ, Organ was on her feet, her weight on one leg.

Jack's arms went around her. The knife—aimed at Jack's stomach—disappeared between them. Jack's eyes bulged, and her cap and stogie went flying through the air.

She lifted Organ easily, using her own head to push Organ's way back. She squeezed hard, pulling in with her giant arms, and Organ screamed.

A crack sounded throughout the station.

The gang panicked, and almost turned their bikes over in a rush to mount them out into the street.

Blood was oozing through the Pendleton at belly level. Organ's body was at Jack's feet in a heap. The gang was gone.

Jack didn't even look at me.

She went over to Oscar, who had somehow gotten to his feet and was holding his groin with both hands, blood streaming down both hands.

She took him by the arm.

And for the first time he started struggling. The tighter she held him, the harder he struggled.

A cry escaped her throat,

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and she hit him. He went out, and in one easy motion she slung him over her shoulder, leaned down, grabbed the handlebar of her bike, and righted it.

She arranged him slowly—hanging him down her back, his arms around her neck, her big hand holding his two hands together on her chest.

She had a little trouble getting on the bike, but was soon straddling it stably, one hand commanding the handlebars.

The bike didn't even wobble as she roared off.

I remember looking through the shed frantically and not finding a single bike that was in running condition. So I went and hid in the bushes.

My legs grew numb while I waited, and then finally the gang straggled back, leaving their choppers and gathering around Organ's body.

I couldn't hear everything, but I heard enough.

"So what?" someone said.

"Organ pushed," someone said a minute later—maybe Screaming Mimi.

"Bad head, so. . ." someone answered.

And then clearly:

"Jack's deep different." Maybe Big Bertha.

"Never hitched to a pig like you, me, hey, everyone," someone added—and I'm sure it was Tarzana.

"Hey, yeah, and never any Big E in her bod either."

"Never needed it."

"Her head's deep different," someone said—maybe Big Bertha again.

The voices grew unclear again as the wind picked up.

And then I heard it—the whole name, the first word, the hole in Jack's jacket, the inked-over name on her needle-free arm.

"Ripper Jack. You remember. . . ."

I don't know who said it, but I recognized the next voice as Tugboat's, and she was talking loudly.

"Yeah, two hundred papas in all, up Oakland way. It's bummed her for a long time, understand. You know, her jacket.

The wind picked up again, but it was Tugboat Annie who kept talking, and she talked for a long time. And the others listened.

When they left, I dragged my blanket from the shed to the bushes, and froze all night.

A car engine—the first I'd heard in weeks—woke me up.

It was morning, and out on the station's asphalt was a cop—uniform and all, squad car with mouse ears and all.

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I stumbled out of the bushes, and the cop spun around. His face wasn't able to hide his scare very well.

But when he saw that I was a guy, he calmed down, and pulled out an official-looking notebook.

"So what happened?"

I got a word or two out, and then stopped. I had started to tell the truth.

I started to lie, and then stopped too.

I didn't want to put the finger on Jack. And at the same time I didn't like the idea of the gang hearing that I had put the finger on them.

The cop stepped toward me, his look changing.

"Say, kid, I hope you weren't the one who did it. No skin off my ass, but you've got big trouble if you did."

He paused, and suddenly was talking faster, his voice higher.

"If you did, I'm sure as hell not taking you out of the Hills in my vehicle!"

He was backing away toward his car.

"Just give me your name and I'll radio for an armored. Remember, I'm doing this just as a favor. No law says I'm obliged to—"

The roar of approaching choppers made him stop.

It made me look around 360 degrees for a place to hide.

I started running back to the bushes, but before I got halfway, Tugboat Annie broke from the pack and cut me off. She circled me once, and then stopped between me and the bushes.

The cop was wide-eyed by now. His back was flush up against his car door, and he was trying to hide his notebook.

"Hey, Mac," Tugboat shouted. I held my breath and looked her back in the eye.

"You stay on," she said loudly, so her gang could hear, "until Jack come back. She won't be a long time comin'."

Some of the others joined her, but joked at it.

"Oh, yeah, stay on—*for us*. . .please!" Velvet Vickie mocked.

"Hey, we got us a mascot, Mimi," Big Bertha crooned, and Mimi's machete sang through the air a couple of times.

"A pig," Tarzana shouted, "but a muckin'-good mech!"

"Yeah," Tugboat said flatly, nodding, smiling at the others, and then looking back at me.

"You stay on, hear," she said quietly—to me alone.

I let myself smile and mumble "Sure." But I shouldn't have.

Tugboat frowned.

"Hear?" she said gruffly.

I nodded, my head down as was proper.

The cop was leaving, his car rolling away. Big Bertha took

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her BAR, braced it against her belly, and aimed it at him. He laid ten feet of tread, went over the curb, and took the corner on two. A block away, his siren went on, and it sounded silly.

I stayed on. I fixed their hogs, and did a good job of it.

But they didn't bring their papas to the station any more. Instead, they kept them locked in Tugboat's house in Gem Crest. Which was fine with me.

All of that happened a little over twelve months ago. The letter—or rather the pictures—came yesterday, and I'm beginning to understand quite a few things now.

The envelope had first been addressed to "Mac Smith"—but then the "Smith" had been crossed out. I'd never given anyone my last name.

So the envelope read:

MAC
c/o JACK'S CHEVRON STATION
23501 LAUREL ROAD
EMERALD HILLS, CALIFORNIA

No return address—but it was obvious who had sent it.

When I opened the envelope, my fingers surprised me by trembling and then fumbling with the two color Polaroid pictures inside.

One is of a rough-hewn cabin, not very well built—certainly not built by a pro-contractor. The picture itself was taken on a slight angle, and is a little overexposed.

The other picture was time-set. Over to one side there's half of a man in motion—just one arm, one shoulder, and half of his chest. He was the one who set the camera and tried to run back in time to be in the picture. You can't see his face, and his arm is muscular, and his chest is well developed—but he hasn't changed so much that he isn't recognizable.

In the middle of the picture there's a wooden chair. On the chair is a heavyset woman, her muscle gone to fat, her breasts flabby under her flower-print blouse. In her lap her big hands are cradling a baby, which is so young it's still pink.

No matter how you look at the picture, her eyes seem to be looking at you. They follow you around.

And you can't tell whether she is smiling or not.

But then, you never could.

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